

PASSING ON:

**“The Weight of Memory” and the Second Generation Fiction of
Anne Michaels, W. G. Sebald and Bernhard Schlink**

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For my grandfather, Herbert Simon McKenzie

17 March 1922 – 31st March 2014

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Abstract

The value of second generation fiction for Holocaust studies can be found in its self-conscious examination of what might constitute an ethical response to the testimony of another. I bring together the fictional texts of three authors of the generation after, Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* and Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, in order to investigate the textual strategies each text employs to bear witness on behalf of another and pass on what Sebald has called "the weight of memory". While Sebald uses the phrase to describe the burden of memory experienced by survivors, I use his phrase as a point of departure to consider how the second generation responds to the burden of memory. Rather than portraying fictional examples of "vicarious witnessing" (Zeitlin) or "witness by adoption" (Hartman), these texts present a form of structural witnessing that models how one storyteller can carry and pass on the story of another as a kind of caretaker. I argue that such forms of witnessing on *behalf of* or *for* another comprise ethical acts in which the other's story is accepted as distinct from one's own. Rather than simply examining "the weight of memory" thematically, each text develops strategies for passing on this weight, and its resultant sense of responsibility, to the reader. I examine the structural and aesthetic strategies employed in these four texts to show how these devices set up the terms by which the text becomes the site of response. I pay particular attention to narrative structures that both model and perform instances of literary address and which create layered structures of "proxy-witnessing" (Gubar) within the space of the text. I consider how fragmentation and failure inform the aesthetics of these authors whose representational strategies may be considered productively "barbaric," to appropriate Adorno's misunderstood aphorism, as the texts present narratives that are unsettling and yet engaging. The work of the generation after is that of carrying memory, but not so as to appropriate it or unduly over-identify with it, but rather to respond and demonstrate response in a gesture which then provokes alternative and continued responses.

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Introduction: The Weight of Memory

1. Introduction

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, W. G. Sebald speaks of “the weight of memory” to describes the point of connection that brings together the four stories in *The Emigrants*. Each of these stories, Sebald explains, is about suicide that occurs late in life as a symptom of what is commonly called “survivor syndrome” or “survivor’s guilt.” “I was familiar with that particular symptom in the abstract,” Sebald tells Wachtel, “through such cases as Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Tadeusz Borowski, and various others who *failed to escape the shadows which were cast over their lives by the Shoah* and ultimately *succumbed to the weight of memory*” (Sebald and Wachtel 38; emphasis mine).¹ In these cases of suicide, Sebald suggests that the inescapable nature of the memory of the Holocaust leads to a growing sense of burden or weight. In his essay on Jean Améry, which I examine more fully in Chapter 4, Sebald explores the link between the psychological burden of the weight of memory and the guilt of survival (*On the Natural History of Destruction* 167). However, the shadow of the Shoah, which Sebald speaks of here, extends further than the generation of survivors and so leads me to explore an expansion or modification of the idea of the weight of memory. This thesis pays particular attention to the way “second

¹ Many of these survivors who “succumb[ed] to the weight of memory” are incorporated in my discussion in various chapters. I include an examination of Paul Celan’s poetry and prose at

generation fiction” explores the possibilities of using textual devices to pass on “the weight of memory.”²

I use Sebald’s term as a point of departure for the central questions of this thesis. If “the weight of memory” is a symptom of survivor syndrome, what form might it take if it is transmitted to the second generation of survivors? And if suicide is a symptom of succumbing to “the weight of memory”—of bowing under the inescapable and impossible burden of memory—what strategies might one employ in order to resist this weight? With these questions in mind, I examine four fictional texts of the second generation that present different responses to “the weight of memory.”

This dissertation argues that the value of second generation fiction for Holocaust studies can be found in its self-conscious examination of what might constitute an ethical response to the testimony of another. I bring together the fictional texts of three authors of the generation after in order to investigate the textual strategies each text employs to bear witness on behalf of another and pass on “the weight of memory.” Rather than portraying fictional examples of what has been termed “vicarious witnessing” or adoptive witnessing, I argue that these texts in this study present a form of structural witnessing and transmission that is best explained as story-carrying.³ My enquiry therefore departs from theorists and critics who suggest that inheriting the memory of survivors and perpetrators results in an overwhelming of one’s identity by the stories of another. Rather I explore how witnessing on *behalf of* or *for* another comprises an ethical act in which the other and her story are accepted as distinct from one’s

² I provide a detailed discussion of my use of the term “second generation fiction” in the next section of the Introduction.

³ “Vicarious witnessing” is Froma Zeitlin’s term (1998), while adoptive witnessing refers to Geoffrey Hartman’s notion of “witness by adoption” (1996).

own. My main concern is to examine the structural and aesthetic strategies employed in each of my four main texts, as these devices set up the terms by which the site of the text becomes the site of *response*. Historically, aesthetics is the term used to speak of a theory of art and the aesthetic is defined as “a set of principles underlying the work of a particular artist or artistic movement” (*OED Online*). However, aesthetics also refers to the experiences of the senses and speaks of the effect of an object or work of art on the senses. When I employ the term, therefore, I bring together these two conceptions: the principles and artistic choices involved in the production of the artwork and the effect that these have on the senses of the recipient. Issues of aesthetics are therefore combined with ethics, as the effect of the work of art creates the site of response. I am therefore interested in how the narrative structures of these texts, and the aesthetic strategies of their authors, develop model a mode of reading that is careful and engaged.

I am interested in the Sebald’s use of the term “weight” as it connotes notions of heaviness and burdens, while also including the idea of a certain level of seriousness or solemnity. The word “weight” speaks of a sense of responsibility. Thus, I employ the term to speak about the idea of carrying memories as if they were burdens or weights placed upon one.⁴ The concept of carrying is important to this thesis, as I argue that the second generation acts of witnessing which I see at work in the texts I examine demonstrate how one storyteller can carry and pass on the story of another as if they were a kind of caretaker.

⁴ Sisyphus is one of the famous mythical characters in literature known for carrying a heavy burden or straining under his heavy rock. In Chapter 4, I consider how the figure of Sisyphus provides avenues for thinking about Sebald’s approach to “the weight of memory” in what I have identified as his “aesthetic of failure”.

2. Passing On

I have titled this thesis “Passing On” for the very reason that these words evoke layered concerns regarding death, the past, memory and its transmission, and testimony or storytelling that I explore in this study. “Passing on” speaks tangentially, even euphemistically, about death. It therefore conjures the mass genocide of the Holocaust at the same time that it refers to how those who survived it are “passing on”: entering into the last decade or two of life at this contemporary moment. To pass on to another also suggests the act of transmission: the way in which memory is transmitted from one generation to the next. Passing on evokes the drive to find a listener who will act as a receptor to and inheritor of memory; by passing on memories those who testify are consciously or unconsciously finding a way in which their story may live on. Their telling creates the potential for the afterlives of their narratives. W. G. Sebald’s character, Austerlitz, openly acknowledges that he had been looking for someone to tell his story to. The more he uncovers of his traumatic past, the more he realizes that he needs to find a listener: “[o]ddly enough, said Austerlitz, [...] he had been thinking of our encounters in Belgium, so long ago now, and telling himself he must find someone to whom he could relate his own story, a story which he had learned only in the last few years and for which he needed the kind of listener I had once been” (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 59-60). This passage leads us to believe that the text of *Austerlitz* represents the afterlife of Austerlitz’s story. It also speaks of the “kind of listener” that the narrator is and gestures towards the fact that his listening develops into retelling.

Austerlitz's need to find a listener reveals his understanding that it is in the telling that his story will live on:

From the first I was astonished by the way Austerlitz put his ideas together as he talked, forming perfectly balanced sentences out of whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the *passing on* of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life. (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 14)

Austerlitz's "historical metaphysic" as the narrator describes it, speaks to the afterlives of events and the afterlives of narratives. It is in his *telling* that Austerlitz brings these memories and histories back into the present. In this dissertation, I examine how the acts of listening, witnessing and reading can perform a similar "historical metaphysic:" bringing remembered events back to life in each instance of their reading and passing on.

3. The Second Generation and Transmitted Trauma

The phrase "the second generation" has become widely understood as referring to the Jewish generation born after the Holocaust. Initially the term was used to refer specifically to children of survivors and its reference to this generational group is, for the most part, fairly consistent in literature that explores the conditions and somewhat unique experiences of this group. However, while the use of the term has been regularly employed to designate the generation born to Holocaust survivors, it has also at times been used to describe the generation of Germans born after the war whose parents were Holocaust perpetrators. As such, the phrase has been broadened to include both the second generation of "survivors" and those of the "perpetrators". I place the phrases "survivors" and "perpetrators" in quotation marks to indicate the way in which such

generalization has become an integral part of the demarcations and subject positions carefully guarded by Holocaust scholars. That the dividing line has been drawn between “Jews” and “Germans” to speak of “survivors” and “perpetrators” respectively is quite obviously reductive. We know that some Jews were involved in perpetration in various forms, as informants and *kapos*, for instance, and not all victims were Jewish either: gypsies, homosexuals and political prisoners suffered and were exterminated at the hands of the Nazi perpetrators as well. Furthermore, the designation “German” is especially problematic, as Jews living in Germany spoke German and considered themselves German citizens.⁵ These designations therefore reveal the reductive Nazi ideology at the core of the Holocaust and its lasting after effects in current scholarship. These designations are not uncontested, however, as I will explore later in this section.

I employ the phrase “the second generation” because it has become synonymous with the notion of the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next. The very concept of generations invokes the idea of continuity, which is one of the reasons why the notion of transmission is so easily expressed through the phrase. The majority of theorists and critics who use the term “the second generation,” or similar terminology, include a discussion of the phenomenon of transmitted trauma in their work. As such, the phrase has come to signal discussions about the transmission of trauma and the ways in which the

⁵ Sebald reveals his sensitivity to this problematic use of the term “German” by distinguishing between “German gentile[s]” and German Jews in an interview (Sebald and Cuomo 111). His sensitivity to German-Jewish emigrants in *The Emigrants* shows how Jews who either immigrated from Germany on their own account, or were forced to leave to escape the Holocaust, still identify as being from Germany. In the same interview with Cuomo, Sebald speaks about finding out that his Jewish landlord in Manchester is actually “from Munich” and “as a small boy he was skiing in the same places where I went skiing [...] he left traces in the snow on the same hills” (Sebald and Cuomo 106). Sebald concludes: “These are different kinds of history lessons” (Sebald and Cuomo 106).

second generation experience a specific type of trauma which, while related to the trauma of the survivors, is specific to those born after the Holocaust. The transmission of trauma was initially explored by those working with the second generation of survivors. Nadine Fresco's often quoted article, "Remembering the Unknown" (1984), for example, provides a useful approach to the impact of transmitted trauma on the children of survivors, which she classifies as those born after the second world war. Fresco identifies and explores the recurrent themes of silence, nostalgia and substitution in the testimonies of the second generation. Her study is, however, confined to the testimonies of the children of Jewish survivors in France. More recently, George Halasz has used the term "second generation" to refer to the children of survivors in his article "Memories of Silence: Trauma Transmission in Holocaust-Survivor Families and the Exiled Self" (2001). Although Halasz's article is primarily informed by clinical experience, he does provide a solid theoretical approach to defining the transmission of trauma. Halasz suggests that transmitted trauma results in the "exiled self," which, he proposes can be recovered through the writing of autobiographical work (118). Similarly, Ellen S. Fine's article, "Intergenerational Memories: Hidden Children and Second Generation" (2001), uses the term "second generation" to refer to the children of survivors. Fine characterizes the experience of these children as the attempt to come to terms with the "wounds they have inherited," thus suggesting a transmission of trauma from one generation to the next (78). She provides a helpful exploration into the workings of naming, exclusion and ghosts in second generation narratives and delivers a valuable discussion of Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* to demonstrate these concepts. Esther Faye's articles, "Missing the 'Real Trace' of Trauma: How the

Second Generation Remember the Holocaust” (2001) and “Being Jewish After Auschwitz: Writing Modernity’s Shame” (2003), both execute complex Lacanian readings of the trauma of transmission at work in the second generation. Faye’s studies are, yet again, confined to the Jewish generation.

While the use of “the second generation” is fairly consistent with regard to the children of survivors, the terminology varies somewhat for the descendants of perpetrators. Harold Marcuse’s article, “Generational Cohorts and the Shaping of Popular Attitudes toward the Holocaust” (2001), comprises a minutely detailed system for the classification of each generation and cohort of Germans from WWII to the present. Marcuse uses the terms “first post-war generation” and the “1968ers” to refer to children born after the war. He provides a brief classification of the common feelings of this generation (that of being victimized by their parents, for example) and refers to Bernhard Schlink as an example. Alan and Naomi Berger’s book, *Second Generation Voices: Reflections of Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators* (2001) presents a collection of second generation testimonies, including those of both the Jewish second generation and the descendants of perpetrators. However, while Berger and Berger use the term “second generation” to include the descendants of perpetrators with those of survivors, they are careful to note the differences between the experiences of each generation: “Although both second generations were raised in partial or total silence about the past, the reason for this silence was different. For Jewish survivors the past contained painful and oppressive memories. The perpetrators were silent because of their guilt” (1-2). While this is a somewhat sweeping generalization about the differences between the generations of “survivors” and “perpetrators,” Berger and Berger’s insistence on

difference within their use of the term “second generation” signals the importance of marking the similarities and differences between these two distinct groups. Erin McGlothlin’s recent work, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (2006), considers how the second generation on both sides shares in the common feeling of being “marked by the continual presence of the Holocaust past” (5). McGlothlin suggests that although the experiences of survivors and perpetrators are qualitatively different, their children share a similar structural relationship to the past, as although “neither has any direct experience with the events of the Shoah,” they “both have a secondary link to the Nazi design to exterminate European Jewry through their parents” (5). In making this distinction, McGlothlin refers to two different testimonies by women whose parents were survivors and perpetrators respectively. She uses these two distinct, yet structurally similar, testimonies in order to discuss each category more generally. McGlothlin points out that the term “second generation” has most widely been used within the sphere of psychological studies and she therefore suggests the more revised designation, “second generation literature” (following the Bergers and Efraim Sicher), to signal her use of it within the literary sphere. My work in this dissertation is most closely aligned with McGlothlin’s study, in that it follows a similar trajectory of examining “texts written quite consciously from the *position* of the second generation” and I build on her insistence of *structural* similarities (McGlothlin 13; emphasis mine). However, while the texts McGlothlin analyses are written from the “perspective of children of those who directly experienced or perpetrated the Holocaust,” the texts I analyse in this dissertation expand on this *position* to consider fictional texts which examine the ways in which the

legacy of the Holocaust extends to a broader group than “the second generation”—a group which has been defined as “the generation after”. For this reason I use the term “second generation fiction” to distinguish it from the broader category of literature that includes memoir and non-fictional testimonies.

“The generation after” is a revised phrase which includes the categories of the children of survivors and perpetrators, as well as those without personal connection to actual survivors or perpetrators, but who are, nevertheless, affected by the aftermath of WWII. The shift in these phrases signals the ways in which more recent scholarship has begun to explore the extensive effects of the Holocaust. For example, Annelies Schulte Nordholt’s article, “Writing the Memory of the Shoah at the Turn of the Century: An Introduction” (2006), expands the category of those who experience transmitted trauma to those outside of the family sphere and, as a result, she uses the term “the generation after” (184). However, while Nordholt uses this term to include Jewish children whose parents were not survivors, she does not employ it to speak of the children of perpetrators. Her article provides a useful discussion on the generation’s obsession with writing fiction about what they have not experienced, which is evident in the texts I explore. In her initial work on the concept of postmemory, Marianne Hirsch employed the term “the second generation” in her definition of the function of postmemory (1997; 2001).⁶ However, as Hirsch’s conceptualization of postmemory shifted to explore the way postmemorial connections are forged across a much wider category—she

⁶ Hirsch’s concept of postmemory is often referred to in many of the critical sources that I have found useful for this dissertation. I explore her concept more fully in Chapter 3.

includes all those born after WWII—she has more recently used the term “the generation after” in her definitions (2008; 2012). Hirsch’s conceptualization of “affiliative” postmemory is specifically linked to her understanding of the widening of the postmemorial circle to include all who are born after the Holocaust (“Generation” 114). Hirsch does, however, use these two phrases interchangeably at times, thus signalling her understanding of the similarities between the two, specifically in their approaches to the work of postmemory, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

As I have mentioned, these designations and phrases are not without critique. Ernst van Alphen has expressed concerns about the use of the term “second generation” and “the generation after,” as he argues that the notion of a generation presupposes a “fundamental continuity” between the first and second generations, when that relationship is defined precisely by discontinuity and difference (474). Van Alphen’s critiques of these terms are aimed primarily at Hirsch’s use of them in her conceptualization of postmemory. While he does not deny that there is “something” specific to the experience of the second generation, he asks whether the “phrase ‘the transmission of trauma’ is appropriate and helpful,” or if “there are other processes at work within these relationships?” (van Alphen 476). Van Alphen sees Hirsch’s use of the term memory as problematic and “indiscriminate” as it “leads to a potential contradiction: Hirsch wants to use the term because of the children’s close personal *connection* with the parents while at the same time speaking of a memory that is indirect and *dis-connected*” (van Alphen 487). Van Alphen asks if what occurs in the second generation is really memory: “one can speak of the memories children have of their parents telling about their Holocaust

experiences. But using the term *memory*, post- or not, only confuses the intergenerational processes [...] with the image the children have of their parents' past" (van Alphen 487). Ultimately, he argues that, "the term *postmemory* shares with the idea of intergenerational transmission of trauma the claim of a fundamental continuity between generations" (van Alphen 488).⁷ Van Alphen does agree, however, that *something* is transmitted structurally between generations. What I see in the texts I explore in this dissertation is that this *something* could be considered a sense of responsibility—a sense of the need to remember *for* the other, or on *behalf of* the other. This is not a suggestion that the practice of remembering *for* another means that another's memories become one's own (or are adopted or internalized as one's own); rather it is a practice of an outward act of commemoration.

4. Three Authors, Four Texts

For the purposes of this dissertation, my discussion considers the fictional works of three authors who are categorized as belonging to "the generation after." My selection of authors and their texts is determined by external and internal reasons. Externally, these works of contemporary fiction were published within a few years of each other: between 1996 and 2001. More specifically, three out of the four texts were published in English between 1996 and 1997: Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* was published in 1996, as was the English translation of W. G. Sebald's, *The Emigrants*, while the English translation of Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* was published in 1997. W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* was

⁷ Hirsch has responded to van Alphen's critiques and defended her use of the term "postmemory"—especially her use of the word "memory"—in her more recent work (2008). I explore this in more detail in Chapter 3.

published in both German and English just four years later in 2001. The English translation of *The Emigrants* was the first of Sebald's texts to be published in English and it brought him rapidly into the critical sphere in which he became highly acclaimed.⁸ Sebald's popularity in the English speaking world is evident in that his American publisher, New Directions, sold more than twice the number of copies in English than were sold in German (Denham, "Foreword" 1). Similarly, *The Reader* was also the first of Schlink's works to be translated into English and, as with Sebald, the overwhelming English reception of Schlink's text quickly placed *The Reader* in the canon of English Holocaust literature. Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of his book in 1999 (it featured in Oprah's book club), as well as its film adaption in 2008, further increased the worldwide reception of *The Reader*, which has sold over two million copies in the US alone. In *The Guardian's* profile on Schlink, Goethe Institute's Barbara Honrath is quoted as saying that *The Reader* "was particularly successful in the English-speaking world" (Wroe n. pag). *Fugitive Pieces* was also adapted for a film that was released in 2008 (the same year as *The Reader*).⁹ Thus, although both Sebald and Schlink wrote in German, the overwhelming English reception of their work invites a discussion of their texts in conversation with other English Holocaust Literature.

⁸ Mark McCulloh and Scott Denman have both made a case for Sebald's work to be considered as part of the English canon. Denman has suggested that Sebald's English reception was stronger than his German one: "W. G. Sebald, praised among critics as the 'most important' and 'most talented' German author of the last generation, or even since the Second World War, was better known and more celebrated in the English-language world of letters than in the German, at least between 1996 and 2003, when his oeuvre, following his death, began to be read more in the German-speaking world" ("Foreword" 1). McCulloh explains that: "W. G. Sebald's first novel to be translated into English was in fact his second to appear in German; his first German novel was the third to appear in English; and his second novel to be published in English was in reality the third to be written," which prompts him to ask: "How, then, should a critical study proceed? Given that Sebald's work has received considerable attention in translation – not only in Great Britain, where Sebald spent the last thirty-two years of his life, but increasingly in North America and in the Commonwealth countries – it seems appropriate to treat his novels as a contemporary phenomenon of the English-language literary scene" (*Understanding W. G. Sebald* xi).

⁹ The film was shown in film festivals the year before, in 2007, but was only released widely in 2008.

Furthermore, as both Schlink and Sebald have published texts in English alone—Sebald's collection of poems, *For Years Now* (2001) was published only in English, as was Schlink's collection of essays titled *Guilt About the Past* (2010)—these English publications allow us to question the conceptualization of Sebald and Schlink as "German" authors exclusively.

Internally, the reasons for my choice of authors and texts are more complex. Both Sebald and Schlink were born in Germany in 1944, whereas Michaels was born in Canada in 1958. I have categorized these authors as all belonging to "the generation after," as two of them are second generation Germans and one is the child of a Polish-Jewish immigrant, who strictly speaking belongs to the "second-and-a-half" generation.¹⁰ However, Michaels has been referred to as belonging to both the "second-and-a-half" generation (Ibsch) and the "second generation" (Eaglestone). As Michaels is therefore part of a slightly later generation, and is not a child of survivors in the strict sense of the term, I will use the broader category of "the generation after" when speaking about these three authors collectively. However, as the protagonist-narrators in my texts would be categorized as belonging to the "second generation," I maintain my use of the term "second generation fiction" to speak of my texts.

Michaels's and Schlink's texts explore the generational dynamics and exchanges within their respective categories of "Jewish/survivor" and "German/perpetrator," while W. G. Sebald presents an interesting variation as his fiction focuses on retelling the stories of child survivors (Austerlitz and Max Ferber) and German Jews (Paul Bereyter), as well as Lithuanian-Jewish and

¹⁰ Ibsch uses the term "second-and-a-half generation" to speak about those who were born a decade or so after the war. He therefore creates a distinction between them and those of the "second generation" who were born either right at the end of the war or immediately after it.

German immigrants (Dr Selwyn and Uncle Ambros). All these stories are retold by a second generation German narrator. Sebald's texts therefore call the static categories of German/perpetrator vs. Jew/victim into question.

Thus these texts explore a wide array of generational relationships: between survivors and the generations who come after them; between perpetrators and their subsequent generations; and between the generation after on both sides. *Fugitive Pieces* presents the memoirs of Jakob Beer, a Jewish child survivor and hidden child, and follows the influence of his writing on Ben, a child of Holocaust survivors. *The Emigrants* is narrated by a German emigrant, presumably from the second generation, who seeks out and retells the stories of four men: a Lithuanian Jew, a German American emigrant and two displaced German-Jews. Even among these four, there is a variety of generations: Henry Selwyn and Great Uncle Ambros come from the generation before WWII, while Paul Bereyter would be categorized as a part of the survivor generation, and Max Ferber is a child survivor.¹¹ In *Austerlitz*, the narrator is again cast as belonging to the second generation of Germans, while Austerlitz is an Austrian Jewish child survivor, who escapes persecution by travelling to England on a Kindertransport where he is subsequently adopted by Welsh foster parents. Finally, *The Reader* explores the dynamics between a Nazi perpetrator and a second generation German (who is presumably the son of conscientious bystanders). Schlink's protagonist, Michael Berg, is situated firmly in the "1968ers" cohort, to use

¹¹ Susan Rubin Suleiman has created the further category of the "1.5 generation" to designate those who were child survivors, as she feels that their experience differs from that of those who were adults during the war: "by 1.5 generation, I mean child survivors of the Holocaust, too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have *been there* during the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Unlike the second generation, whose most common shared experience is that of belatedness—perhaps best summed up by French writer Henri Raczymow's rueful statement, "we cannot even say we were *almost* deported" (1986, 104)—the 1.5 generation's shared experience is that of premature bewilderment and helplessness" (277).

Marcuse's term, as passages of the book describe his university experiences during the time of the student uprisings.¹²

Collectively, however, these texts all depart from the traditional "second generation literature" in that they do not focus on the generational relationships and transmission within the family sphere. These texts therefore represent a further stage in the development of Holocaust literature, one that confronts the variety of generational relationships—and their resultant different types of transmission—which occur *outside* of the family sphere. This is not to say that these texts do not examine the transmission of trauma within the family (*Fugitive Pieces* explores this in the second part of the narrative and *The Reader* considers the generational conflict within the family through its discussion of the student protests), but it is not their primary focus. What these works of fiction offer is an examination of the way trauma and testimony occurs across generations, within generations and even across the survivor-perpetrator divide. These alternative avenues of transmission are primarily staged *structurally* in each narrative: between the narrator-protagonist who functions as an authorial figure and those whose stories he retells.

The internal and external reasons for choosing these authors and their respective texts are brought together by the way each author weaves an element of self-inscription into his or her work. Anne Michaels, for example, inscribes herself into the character of Michaela (primarily through the variation on her name and the correlation between their biographic details).¹³ Similarly, Sebald

¹² See Schlink, *The Reader* 168-169.

¹³ Susan Gubar suggests the correlation between Michaels's surname and Michaela. She also remarks on the connection between Michaels's "personal history" and that of Michaela's: "In several interviews, Michaels (whose father arrived in Canada from Europe at thirteen years of

gestures towards a characterization of himself in the Sebaldian narrator, who shares his birthday among many other biographical details.¹⁴ Schlink also shares biographical details with his character Michael Berg, who, like Schlink, graduates as a law student in the “summer of the student upheavals,” and marries a lawyer (*The Reader* 168; 172). These gestures at self-inscription highlight the way that, while fictional, these texts speak of a history that is also personal for these authors. Inscribing themselves into the role of the listener casts these authors themselves as witnesses. However, all three of my authors takes care to include details about their characters that differ from their own biographies, thus calling attention to the fictionality of their texts and distancing themselves from any reductive reading which would presume their fictional texts to be masked autobiographies. While my primary analysis focuses on four texts, I do not restrict my discussion to these works alone, but include other works by each of these authors, especially when discussing their aesthetic strategies.

5. The Story That Cries Out: Trauma as Address

The field of Holocaust studies is vast and interdisciplinary in nature; trauma studies in particular have drawn on and been approached from various disciplines ranging from psychology, sociology, historiography and history to philosophy and theory. My theoretical approach for this study traces the progression of these diverse fields of study as they begin to become more explicitly vocalised within the literary sphere. Initial work on the intersection between the psychoanalytic approach to trauma and literature was carried out

age in 1931) describes her family's experiences in terms that correspond to Michaela's recollections of her family's" (Gubar, "Empathic" 262; n22, 262)

¹⁴ I spend more time looking at the characterization of the Sebaldian narrator in Chapter 3.

by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their psychoanalytic approach to a theory of testimony, outlined in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), and by Cathy Caruth in her understanding of trauma and literature in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) and her edited volume, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). What these theorists have in common is their exploration of the ways in which psychoanalytic and clinical theories of trauma resonate with the literary. Felman and Laub's book presents a dense study of both the clinical and literary approaches to a theory of testimony. The authors argue that the Holocaust presents a "crisis of witnessing" as it is "'an event without a witness'—an event eliminating its own witness" (xvii). Caruth's innovative presentation of the intersection between Freud's understanding of trauma and that of literature focuses on the belatedness of the traumatic event and the "complex relation between knowing and not knowing," which, she argues, provides the intersection between literature and psychoanalytic theory (*Unclaimed* 3). Caruth highlights trauma as more than pathology: as "the story of the wound that cries out, that *addresses us in the attempt to tell* us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (*Unclaimed* 4; emphasis mine). Caruth's insistence on the element of address inherent in trauma has provoked my further exploration of the nature of textual and visual forms of address I see at work in the texts I analyse in this study.

While Felman and Laub and Caruth all explore the relation between literature and trauma, trauma fiction as a genre was first fully defined by Anne Whitehead in her seminal text, *Trauma Fiction* (2004). With reference to Felman and Laub, Caruth and others, Whitehead proposed a specific affinity of literary

criticism with trauma theory in which each discourse provides helpful extensions of the other. Whitehead rejects simple applications of psychoanalytic theory to texts; rather she argues that there is “a resonance between theory and literature in which each speaks to and addresses the other [...] Rather than simply illustrating the theory, the readings are an extension of the theories own silences” (*Trauma* 4). It is this understanding of the dialogue between trauma theory and trauma fiction which I build on in this dissertation. While Whitehead has given some room in her text to the acknowledgement of the transmission of trauma, and has noted in her introductory chapter that Michaels’s and Sebald’s texts act as models of the witnessing process, she has not explored the possibility that these texts offer an explanation of the position of the second generation. Speaking about *Fugitive Pieces* and *Austerlitz*, Whitehead writes that: “these novels [...] create a community of witnesses which implicitly includes the reader, so that the very act of reading comprises a mode of bearing witness. At the same time, the novelists position the narrator as a mediator of others’ stories and so find a way of expressing an experience which is not directly their own” (Whitehead 8). However, Whitehead sees these novels as bearing the “risk of appropriation” which she considers unethical (8).

Many theorists of trauma and testimony maintain that identification in the trauma of another is unethical (see for example, Felman and Laub (1992), LaCapra (2001) and Whitehead (2004)). However, while over-identification is cautioned against, the same theorists acknowledge that the trauma of the second generation is a specific type of trauma of transmission, where the second generation *inherits* trauma. It is this inherited nature of trauma which creates implicit identification in the second generation and thus problematizes the

boundaries raised between empathy and over-identification. Anne Karpf's memoir, *The War After: Living with the Holocaust*, is often quoted as an extreme example of the bodily manifestation of transmitted trauma. As a child of survivors, Karpf developed extreme eczema on her arm in the exact place where her parents had tattoos. Karpf's memoir forces us to consider the extent to which the second generation inherit, within their bodies, their parents' trauma. Traditionally, trauma theorists have cautioned against the conflation of empathy and over-identification, arguing that those who over-identify with the trauma of another act unethically. Dominick LaCapra has distinguished between the responses of empathy (ethical) and over-identification (unethical) with the trauma of another, arguing that "empathy should not be conflated with unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage" (*Writing* 40). By making this distinction, LaCapra maintains that empathy and identification cannot coexist. However, I propose that the second generation's experience of transmitted trauma places them precisely in the liminal space of empathic over-identification.

The second generation is commonly considered to experience both transmitted trauma, which I argue causes them to be implicit identifiers with the trauma of another, and also the experience of feeling the responsibility to act as empathic listeners to the trauma of others. In "Trauma, Absence, Loss," when LaCapra voices concern about the conflation of empathy and identity, he argues rather for a response to testimonies in the form of "empathic unsettlement" (699). LaCapra notes that "the difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity" ("Trauma" 699). Thus these debates about

empathy and identification are primarily concerned with the *response* of the second generation (or any witnesses or listeners in the broader sense) to the history and memories of another. They are therefore debates about ethics. “The ethical questions raised by testimony are inherently literary,” writes Whitehead, “Trauma theory readjusts the relationship between reader and text, so that reading is restored as an ethical practice” (Whitehead 8).

6. Postmemory

Marianne Hirsch’s conception of postmemory has formed an invaluable point of departure for my readings of the four main texts of this thesis. While Hirsch describes postmemory as a symptom of the generation after, she maintains that postmemory is inherently different from memory, as it is not mediated by recall, but by creation. It is Hirsch’s emphasis on creation and imagination that causes her concept of postmemory to invite conversation with fiction. She defines postmemory as:

the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (“Generation” 106-7)

Interestingly, these italics in Hirsch’s definition are not present in her initial writings about postmemory (1999), but only appear in her most recent definitions of the term (2008 and 2012). What one deduces from this is that she needed to place more emphasis on the fact that postmemory is different from

memory and that she is working within the sphere of affect and how things might “seem,” rather than actual experiences. Consider her previous definition, for example: postmemory “describes the relationship of the second-generation to the powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch, *Family* 103). Hirsch’s use of italics in her more recent definition is presumably a response to critics, such as van Alphen, who take issue with her use of the term memory. As I use postmemory primarily as a term through which to consider fictional narratives, I am more interested in the aspects of Hirsch’s definition that apply to the realm of fiction. For example, I find that the attributes of “imaginative investment” and “creation” provide a helpful way to consider the work of my authors, whereas Hirsch’s insistence on the role of “projection” takes her concept along lines that I wish to avoid.

Hirsch situates her notion of postmemory within discussions which mark what Eva Hoffman has termed the “era of memory” (Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge* 203). As the last survivors begin to pass away, Hirsch notes that the “‘guardianship’ of a traumatic personal and generational past” tends to create a sense of “ownership and protectiveness” which, she suggests, has influenced the “evolving theoretical discussion about the workings of trauma, memory, and intergenerational acts of transfer” (“Generation” 104). While she acknowledges the desire of those who wish to assert a specifically familial second-generation identity (she footnotes Bos 2003 and Bukiet 2002), Hirsch does not categorise herself with these writers. Rather, she argues, “that postmemory is not an *identity* position but a *generational* structure of transmission deeply embedded in [...] forms of mediation” (“Generation” 187).

One of Hirsch's most contentious assertions is that the postmemorial circle forms are a wider "affiliative" group than just those of the strict "familial" second generation. For Hirsch, this is due to the fact that "[f]amily life, even in its most intimate moments, is enriched in a collective imagery shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the transmission of individual and familial remembrance" ("Generation" 187). In an interview with Columbia University Press about her recent book, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, Hirsch describes how she came to broaden her understanding of postmemory as follows:

I realized [...] that my experiences were not at all unique. Not only did I share them with other descendants of Holocaust survivors, but they described a larger cultural phenomenon common to my generation—a generation dominated by histories we did not ourselves live through. Memories are not just personal or familial. They are, as I describe in the book, more broadly affiliative—mediated by public images and stories that are transmitted to us from overpowering historical events like the Holocaust. (Hirsch, Columbia UP Interview)

Thus, Hirsch sees the phenomenon of postmemory as broadly including all members of her generation; it is therefore more an instance of collective memory than private or personal memory. Hirsch describes "familial" structures of postmemory as occurring within the family (as vertical), whereas "affiliative" structures occur within the broader circle of friends, peers or contemporaries (and are therefore more horizontal). As my texts examine structures of transmission that occur outside of the family circle, Hirsch's concept of affiliative postmemory provides a helpful way for considering the type of transmission that might occur. Hirsch's use of words such as "dominated" and "overpowering" in

her definition above, speak of history as heavy, burdensome and overbearing, which links it to my focus on “the weight of memory” which frames the inquiry of this thesis.

Furthermore, Hirsch’s exploration of postmemorial aesthetic strategies has been useful in conceptualizing my approach to the works of fiction discussed in this dissertation. Through analysing Hirsch’s discussion of an installation titled *Torture of Women* by Nancy Spero, I have distilled the following postmemorial aesthetic strategies: various alienation devices, explicit foregrounding of the sources of various media used, overt consciousness and expressed responsibility about the artist’s role as a retrospective witness and the use of imagination and aesthetic layering which resists easy identification (*Generation* 150-151). These strategies differ significantly from the range of literary techniques and stylistic devices which Anne Whitehead examines in her book, *Trauma Fiction*. However, the difference between the two is not surprising, as authors of trauma fiction employ literary devices in an effort to mimic the experience of trauma. In order to “represent trauma, or to narrate the unnarratable,” Whitehead proposes that “novelists draw, in particular, on literary techniques that mirror at a formal level the effects of trauma” (*Trauma Fiction* 4; 84). In contrast to what Whitehead outlines, the postmemorial work that Hirsch considers (I am referring specifically to her engagement with Spero’s work) seeks not only to represent the effects of trauma, but more specifically to reveal the *position* of the second generation witness and reflect on the process or act of witnessing. It is for these reasons that narrative structure plays such an integral part in second generation art and that postmemory is a useful concept for speaking about the structures of transmission. Hirsch focuses quite intently

on the way postmemorial art often includes gestures towards its artists, such as the hands which hold the photographs in Lorie Novak's *Postmemory* (which is used as the cover image for Hirsch's most recent book) and *Night and Fog*, and in Spiegelman's family photograph in *Maus* (*Generation* 25; 123; 44). For Hirsch, "the hand in Novak's image introduces a viewer, someone who holds, listens and responds. That postmemorial artist can intervene and connect the public and private images that have survived the Shoah, introducing them into a landscape in which they have an afterlife" (*Generation* 123). Similarly, the texts I examine introduce a listener within the world of the text, who, like the hand in these images, receives and responds in such a way as to "intervene" and construct the terms by which these narratives can have an "afterlife" as they are passed on to the listener outside the confines of the text.

7. Caretakers

Hirsch has acknowledged that her description of the structure of postmemory as involving inter- and transgenerational transmission of trauma raises many questions. One of these questions which is of particular importance to this study is the following: "is postmemory limited to the intimate embodied space of the family, or can it extend to more distant, adoptive witnesses? Is postmemory limited to victims, or does it include bystanders and perpetrators, or could one argue that it complicates the delineations of these positions which, in Holocaust studies, have come to be taken for granted?" (Hirsch, "Generation" 107). It seems to be questions such as these which have made Hirsch's notion of postmemory so controversial. Hirsch's use of the language of "adoption" and "memory" has caused her critics to take issue with the ethics of her concept of postmemory.

However, the questions Hirsch asks above need to be answered at a time when those who were involved in the Holocaust are passing away. It seems that the more time lapses between the present day and the event of the Holocaust, the more such delineations tend to become fixed.

Hirsch's notion of "adoptive witnesses" pursues a different line of enquiry to what I propose through my notion of caretakers. Hirsch's assertion that the wider generation shares the legacy of trauma and is therefore part of the postmemorial circle, leads her to ask the following crucial questions:

If we thus *adopt* the traumatic experiences of others as experiences that we might ourselves have lived through, if we inscribe them into our own life story, can we do so without imitating or unduly appropriating them? And is this process of identification, imagination, and projection radically different for those who grew up in survivor families and for those less proximate members of their generation or relational network who share a legacy of trauma and thus the curiosity, the urgency, the frustrated *need* to know about a traumatic past? (Hirsch "Generation" 187; original emphasis)¹⁵

I would like to point out a crucial difference here, between the way Hirsch speaks about how "we" inscribe traumatic experiences into "our own" life stories, and how I see the authors of my study reversing these roles: inscribing themselves into the life stories of others. Rather than appropriating the traumatic experiences of others as if they were their own, the authors of my study insert their fictional characters (who bear certain resemblances to themselves) into the situation as witnesses of the traumatic experiences of others. Hirsch, however, states this question slightly differently earlier on in her paper when she asks:

¹⁵ Hirsch aligns herself with Geoffrey Hartman and Ross Chamberlain in this regard; both "acknowledge a break in [the notion of] biological transmission even as they preserve the familial frame" in their respective work (Hartman's "notion of 'witness by adoption' and Chamberlain's term 'foster writing') ("Generation" 187).

“How can we best *carry* their stories forward without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them?” (“Generation” 104; emphasis mine). In thinking about what it might mean to “carry” another’s story, I return to my exploration of what it might look like for the second generation to bear and pass on the memories of others. Carrying another’s story seems to be much less ethically questionable than that of “adopting” it as one’s own. In contrast to adopting a story as one’s own, carrying suggests an act *for* the other. While carrying another’s story does, however, include a measure of identification, I argue that it need not necessarily fall into over-identification or result in a scenario where one’s own story is displaced or “evacuated” as a result.

In his discussion of Hirsch’s notion of postmemory in Sebald’s work, J. J. Long suggests that postmemory should be considered a hybrid of memory and history. He argues that Hirsch offers the term postmemory to

characterize a mode of remembering that traverses generations. For Hirsch, postmemory is distinguished from memory by the generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. She adds that it is a ‘powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or its source is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation’ (Hirsch *Family Frames* 22). (Long 2003: 122)

Hirsch’s terms “imaginative investment” and “creation” used above suggest an element of affective investment on the part of the agent of postmemory, which, Long rightly points out, is something that historical texts would try to avoid. As LaCapra is writing from the perspective of a historian, therefore, his insistence on the separateness of empathy and over-identification is understandable. I would therefore like to suggest that this form of identification with the story of

another described through the structure of postmemory be termed “carrying” rather than “adopting,” as in the texts examined in this dissertation, the narrators carry and pass on the stories of others, rather than adopt them.

The difference here lies in the way the narrator is inscribed into the story. If a narrator inscribes himself into the stories of others as a minor character (one who listens), he appears to be functioning contrary to what Hirsch suggests above: that when we adopt others stories, we inscribe their stories into our own narratives.¹⁶ The texts I examine therefore depart from “fantasies of witnessing” in which the witness desires to “feel the horror” for themselves, as Gary Weissman has suggested in his book *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*. Weissman offers a reflection on the popularity of Holocaust and Trauma studies in his book, and suggests that the attraction of these disciplines might be more about our own desire to “feel the horror” than our need to remember on behalf of another (21). Weissman’s questions are important to ask, considering the incredible popularity of Holocaust and Trauma studies, and the works he studies do indeed demonstrate a desire to “vicariously experience” the Holocaust (4). However, the texts in this study portray second generation witnesses who are not attempting to relive or “feel the horror” as Weissman suggests. While the protagonists might acknowledge the desire to imagine on behalf of the other, for the most part they avoid such fantasies and rather function as caretakers of stories which speak of the Holocaust tangentially: poetically, soberly and with a sense of great disturbance and unease that witnessing might slip into fantasizing.

¹⁶ In order to avoid the cumbersome nature of the accepted gender-neutral singular third-person pronoun, I have chosen to alternate between the genders when speaking of the subject in the third person.

Carrying does not involve adoption, “suturing” or inscribing the story of the other into one’s own story. Carrying, rather, involves foregrounding another’s story in order to pass it on. As such, it comprises acts which resemble caretaking or curating. In Sebald’s texts the reader knows very little about the narrator, yet his primary characteristic comes through each text clearly: he is a collector and recorder of stories and memories who looks to writing as a means to pass them on. The textual strategies employed in Sebald and Michaels’s work, therefore, offer an answer to Hirsch’s questions as how best to carry the stories of others, while Schlink’s text problematizes this desire. Sebald’s narrator falls into the category of the “less proximate”, and, as such, he does not adopt the stories of those he tells, but rather carries them in order to pass them on. In the chapters that follow, I explore a variety of structural and aesthetic strategies which foreground the act of carrying or caretaking and thus provide varied textual responses of what it might look like to pass on the weight of memory.

8. Chapter Outline

The first two chapters of this thesis focus on Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*. In Chapter 1, “Textual Address in Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*,” I examine how the two-part structure of *Fugitive Pieces* contains elements of a musical fugue, which creates the effect of layered voices in posthumous dialogue. I contextualize the first part of my discussion by exploring Susan Gubar’s notion of “proxy-witnessing” and I argue that the narrative structure of the novel presents a further layering of the concept: the witness to the proxy-witness. In the second part of the chapter I build on Carrol Clarkson’s conceptualization of the ethical effect of literary address (which draws on Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and

Bakhtin) in order to analyse how the layering of voices in the text presents a persona *within* the text who overhears an address and responds to it *within* the text. I argue that this narrative construction positions the reader, who stands *outside* the world of the text, to overhear an overheard address, thus adding a further layer of textual address. Such positioning, I argue, places the reader of the text in the position of both witness and addressee and therefore sets up the terms for a site of response.

My discussion shifts from a consideration of Michaels's narrative structure to an exploration of her aesthetics in Chapter 2, "'Language is Broken, Bulky, Dissolute': Anne Michaels's Aesthetic of Fragmentation." *Fugitive Pieces* is a densely poetic novel that has been hailed as a retort to Theodor Adorno's famous dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms* 34). However, a closer examination of Adorno's dialectical method reveals the misreading inherent in this argument. I make a case for reading Michaels's aesthetic of fragmentation as closely aligned with Adorno's dialectical style, by examining how Michaels's structural use of fragmentation (in her chapters, sections and sentences) might be considered "productively barbaric" as it presents a heightened sense of self-reflexivity and unease about its use of language. My scope in this chapter extends to include discussions and analyses of Michaels's essays and extracts of her poetry. Michaels's use of fragmentation displays the tensions between the necessity of language in representation and the writer's awareness of its limitations and lacks. Both Adorno and Michaels's methods aim to engage their readers through confronting them with irreconcilable contradictions held together in tension. The Holocaust poet Paul Celan is present in many instances of this discussion, as his poetics share similarities with Adorno

and with Michaels. I also propose that Michaels's poet-protagonist, Jakob Beer, is modelled on Celan in that he searches for ways to wreck language in order to signal the fragmented and fraught nature of this medium.

Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to readings of W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*, as these are his texts that address the Holocaust most explicitly and examine the structures of transmission across and between generations. These chapters follow the structure I began with my examination of Michaels's work: I first explore how Sebald's texts structurally position their reader within a destabilizing, yet productively engaging space and I then move to consider the ethics of Sebald's aesthetic strategies. In Chapter 3, "A Dubious Business': Fact, Fiction and Photography in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*," I analyse how the reproduction of photographs in Sebald's texts works as an instance of visual address and as a form of structural postmemory which are both destabilizing and yet productive. My conceptualization of the notion of *structural* postmemory is informed by Hirsch's insistence that postmemory is a *structure* and not an identity position. I look at how Sebald's texts are structured to position their readers in a lineage of inheritors of memory. I suggest that photographs create layers of visual address in Sebald's texts which work in a similar way to instances of textual address. However, I argue that Sebald calls the nature of photography into question at the same time that he employs this medium in his work. His photographs have an inherently destabilizing effect and have therefore provoked Sebald's critics and interviewers' anxious attempts to separate fact from fiction in his texts: however, this is an effort Sebald both consciously provokes and simultaneously parries. It is my argument that Sebald reveals our expectation of photographs as documentary evidence in order to

provoke us to more careful, slow and meaningful engagement with his photographs and the narratives that surround them.

Chapter 4, “‘The Harried Paper’: An Aesthetics of Failure in W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*,” brings my discussion back to an exploration of the nature of aesthetics. Where Michaels’s aesthetic of fragmentation emphasizes the fraught nature of language, Sebald’s aesthetic of failure takes this concept in a slightly different direction by focusing on the *position* of the second generation artist. For Sebald, it is the representation of the attempt to represent which is poignant, because such attempts necessarily fall short for their aim at the same time that they speak of the effort of the artist. Sebald’s aesthetic is, therefore, an aesthetic of attempting to represent while acknowledging inevitable failure. It is this acknowledgement and acceptance of failure that gives Sebald’s texts their melancholic tone and yet the continual attempts of the artist gesture towards the hope of success even as they fail. In this chapter I examine how failure is portrayed in both *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, while also paying close attention to the influence of Walter Benjamin and Jean Améry on the development of Sebald’s aesthetic. I consider how the mythical figure of Sisyphus, especially Albert Camus’s existentialist reading of him, provides a template through which to examine the possibility of hope in the midst of perpetual failure for the postgeneration artist.

In Chapter 5, “An Alternative Weight: The Memory of Perpetration in Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*,” my discussion moves to consider an important counter-text, which examines a different weight of memory and thus answers my other chapters in a fugue-like variation which highlights difference. While my chapters on Michaels and Sebald explore the ethics and aesthetics of literary

modes of remembering and commemorating those who were victims of the Holocaust, my discussion of Schlink's novel considers the ethical dynamics at stake in attempts to remember and memorialize perpetrators. The weight of the memory of perpetration is a very different kind of burden: it is not the burden of the loss of the dead and the guilt of survival, but rather the tension created by living alongside perpetrators and being complicit in a society that keeps their secrets. It is my argument that *The Reader* performs a different kind of passing on: one which reveals the fraught space of empathy and love for perpetrators and seeks to bring closure rather than elicit further acts of remembrance. *The Reader* performs a double-telling: while Michael's testimony attempts to provide redress for Hanna and seeks closure on one level, beneath its assertive prose the text is haunted by its untold stories. *The Reader* positions us as listeners of a confession, rather than a testimony which seeks to be retold; it does not engage in structural layering of voices or instances of proxy-witnessing but rather presents a first-person monologue-like narrative. I argue that Schlink's text is destabilizing as it reveals the secrets kept by the second generation. The contingency of the story destabilizes our reading of the text, thus placing us in a similar situation to Michael, where we are surrounded by haunting instances of the past which appear to conceal more than they reveal.

The study of aesthetics has to do with the senses. In the five chapters of this thesis I have focused mainly on instances of the visual and the verbal in second generation narratives. However, by way of conclusion, I examine a book that works primarily as a tangible—touchable—art object. *Correspondences: A Poem and Portraits* (2013) is a recent co-authored publication of Anne Michaels's that works as a conceptual piece which makes visible the aesthetic and ethical

structures and strategies I have examined in this thesis. The physical presentation of the book is productively destabilizing: its layout foregrounds its fragile instability at the same time that it highlights the act of reading. The text's physical form enacts layers of conversations and dialogues that speak to and include the reader within a broader conversation. I argue that the book presents an invitation to a mode of reading that is slow, careful and engaged; its contingency approaches the reader, who is conceptualized as "the third side of the page"—the fruitful product or offspring of the narrative (Michaels, *Correspondences*). My discussion of this text leads me to explore the afterlives of narratives: the reader becomes the first instance of a narrative's afterlife. I return to notions of "the weight of memory" and passing on in an effort to restate my thesis: the work of the generation after is that of carrying memory, but not so as to appropriate it or unduly over-identify with it, but rather to respond and demonstrate response in a gesture which then provokes alternative and continued responses.

Chapter 1: Textual Address in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*

I sat at your desk for a long time before I opened the first notebook. Then I read randomly.
Time is a blind guide. . . .
To remain with the dead is to abandon them. . . .
One becomes undone by a photograph, by love that closes its
mouth before calling a name. . . .
In the cave her hair makes. . . .

(Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* 284)

1. Introduction

On opening a copy of Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, the reader is presented with a brief one-page prologue, in which the notion of one man writing for another is delineated. Not only does the prologue highlight the process of "proxy-witnessing"¹⁷ at work in the novel, it also acknowledges the various fates of memories: both those which have been lost as a result of death and also those which have been passed on:

During the Second World War, countless manuscripts — diaries, memoirs, eyewitness accounts — were lost or destroyed. Some of these narratives were deliberately hidden — buried in back gardens, tucked into walls and under floors — by those who did not live to retrieve them.

Other stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken. Still others are recovered, by circumstance alone.

(Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* i)

Indeed, memory and its potential journey to written memoir is also a preoccupation in Michaels's poetry. The above extract from the prologue of *Fugitive Pieces* contains echoes of a section in Michaels's poem "What the Light Teaches," which dwells on buried and lost memoir:

A writer buried his testimony
in the garden, black type in black soil,

¹⁷ "Proxy-witnessing" is a term developed by Susan Gubar to designate a "reliance on earlier testimony" in which the writer becomes a witness to the witness. I explore Gubar's conception of proxy-witnessing in more detail in this chapter (*Poetry After Auschwitz* 166).

trusting that someday earth would speak.
All those years of war and uncertainty after,
no one knew the power of his incantation,
calling quietly from its dark envelope.
From his notebook grew orchids and weeds. (*Weight/Miner's* 117)

However, unlike the fate of the unrecovered testimony in this poem, the primary testimony in *Fugitive Pieces* is recorded in memoir, which is hidden for a while before it is discovered and passed on. It is after this brief description of the various forms of hidden and lost memories in the prologue, that we read the following:

Poet Jakob Beer, who was also a translator of posthumous writing from the war, was struck and killed by a car in Athens in the spring of 1993, at age sixty. His wife had been standing with him on the sidewalk; she survived her husband by two days. They had no children. Shortly before his death, Beer had begun to write his memoirs. 'A man's experience of war,' he once wrote, 'never ends with the war. A man's work, like his life, is never completed. . . .' (Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* i)

This idea of posthumous writing, which is introduced here, is performed throughout the text of *Fugitive Pieces*, as we find ourselves reading the very memoirs of Poet Jakob Beer, which are referred to in the prologue. As readers we know that we are therefore reading memoirs that were never finished: the prologue tells us that it was only shortly before his death, that Beer began to write. Furthermore, when placed alongside the references to hidden memoirs, buried memories and posthumous writing in the prologue, we gradually begin to realise that these memoirs have been passed on posthumously by another.

At a basic level, *Fugitive Pieces* is structured in a two-part form: There is a one-page prologue, which is followed by part I and part II. The first part comprises Holocaust survivor, Jakob Beer's memoirs, written in notebooks and discovered after his death by Ben, who is the author of the second part of the

novel (and, presumably, of the prologue as well). Ben's section (part II) also contains his memories of growing up as the child of survivors. Large sections of Ben's memoirs are addressed specifically to Jakob, describing his search for Jakob's notebooks and his attempts to learn the secret of the tranquillity he sensed in Jakob when the two briefly met.

However, while *Fugitive Pieces* conjures the very real and traumatic memory of the Holocaust, a word about its fictional genre is in order. Although the prologue frames Jakob Beer as an actual survivor, the reader should necessarily be aware that the prologue is also part of the fictional construct of the novel as a whole and is, as I have already mentioned, presumably meant to be read as written by Ben. So while I will make many references to memory and memoirs within the text of *Fugitive Pieces*, all these are references to *fictionalized* memories and memoirs as they all appear within the constraints of a novel. Donna Coffey has proposed that in presenting a fictionalized memoir, "*Fugitive Pieces* raises many of the ethical issues surrounding the fictionalising of the Holocaust" (30). With reference to Daniel Schwarz's work, *Imagining the Holocaust*, Coffey suggests that the underlying anxieties over fictionalizing the Holocaust are that it could be disrespectful to the truth of the event. Schwarz has traced the progression of Holocaust literature from memoir to fiction and has shown that even literature that is not realist contains documentary techniques in order to maintain a sense of responsibility to the historical reality of the event. Schwarz calls fiction which displays such documentary techniques "docufiction" (Schwarz 195). Such fictionalized accounts of the Holocaust which employ these devices, keep the memory of the Holocaust alive in the imagination, Schwarz suggests. Coffey, however, suggests that *Fugitive Pieces* both "meets Schwarz's

definition of 'docufiction,' since it is a fictionalization of Holocaust memoir" at the same time that it also "departs radically from 'docufiction' in blending poetic language into the already blurred boundaries of memoir and fiction" (Coffey 31). However, as I will explore in this chapter and the one following it, Anne Michaels's poetic language in *Fugitive Pieces* works as a productive engagement with the tensions of representing the Holocaust in language. In employing docufictional techniques together with densely poetic language, *Fugitive Pieces* presents a fictional account which performs what Susan Gubar calls "proxy-witnessing". The concept of "proxy-witnessing" is embedded in Schwarz's conceptualization of "docufiction": both function within the realm of ethical responsibility. "When we write 50 years later of those who wrote as survivors," Schwarz writes, "we bear a moral responsibility because we become *witnesses to witnesses*" (14; emphasis mine). Schwarz's phrase, "witnesses to witnesses," echoes Gubar's concept of proxy-witnessing. For Gubar, proxy-witnessing involves "a reliance on earlier testimony" which speaks of "legal venues for finding a way to testify for those (such as children, or animals, or the dead) who cannot testify for themselves" (*Poetry* 166). In her analysis of poetry which functions in the realm of proxy-witnessing, Gubar highlights how "poets insistently focus on collecting and circulating events recollected by eye-witnesses" (*Poetry*, 166). The concept of a proxy-witness, who reproduces and adds to previous accounts, therefore provides a helpful theoretical conceptualization for the models of fictional witnessing at work in Michaels's text. We see something of this at work in the passage I used as the epigraph for this chapter, where Ben includes parts of Jakob's text within his own memoirs and distinguishes Jakob's words from his own by placing them in italics.

In her analysis of *Fugitive Pieces*, Gubar uses the term “proxy-witnessing” to designate the writing for another which often occurs in post-Holocaust testimony. She suggests that the forms of writing for another portrayed in *Fugitive Pieces* “hint at the crucial roles post-Holocaust proxy-witnessing plays in preserving memory as well as its poignant inability to provide adequate knowledge of or recompense for the dead” (Gubar, “Empathic” 260). Proxy-witnessing in *Fugitive Pieces* therefore maintains the tension between expressing the desire to witness on behalf of the witnesses, while revealing that the document is not an original memoir and cannot speak from the direct experience of the event. Gubar considers how Jakob’s “ghostwriting” on behalf of Athos and Ben’s proxy-witnessing for Jakob enables the novel to gesture,

toward many post-Holocaust artists’ and intellectuals’ need to conjure the dead [...] Through their excavation and analysis of earlier testimony, Jakob (with the dead Athos) and Ben (with the dead Jakob) typify the attempts of many creative writers, visual artists, and scholars to witness the witnesses in a manner that displays how post-Holocaust proxy-witnessing will attempt to keep the memory of the Shoah alive during a period (soon to come) when there will be no survivors alive to attest for themselves. (Gubar, “Empathic” 260; 271)

However, *Fugitive Pieces* incorporates a fictionalized eyewitness account, which departs somewhat from Gubar’s concept of proxy-witnessing. Gubar’s reading of the novel does not account for this, as she suggests that Anne Michaels performs a kind of ghostwriting on behalf of Jakob: “the female signature on the title page [...] with] the novel’s opening dedication (for ‘J’) and its prefatory paragraphs [...] frame the first section as an actual autobiography of a real survivor that historical exigency caused to go unwritten until the task was adopted by the woman author who ghostwrote it for him” (Gubar, “Empathic” 271). While I am hesitant to agree with Gubar’s assertion that Jakob’s memoirs are presented as

“actual” autobiography ghostwritten by Michaels (I am more comfortable with reading them as fictional memoir, written, yes, by Michaels, but without any claim to actual historical persons or memories), her concept of the role of proxy-witnessing provides a useful way for analysing the forms of witnessing modelled by both Jakob and Ben.

What I wish to examine in this chapter is how the structure of *Fugitive Pieces* offers a model of response to the dead, while including the reader in this response through positioning her as a potential witness. More specifically, I am interested in the effect of the fugue-like layering of voices inherent in the two-part structure of the text. *Fugitive Pieces* presents a persona within the world of the text who overhears an address and responds to it. This persona functions as a reader who is addressed by the text. However, the layering of an address and a response within the world of the text positions the reader of the text as one who overhears another overhearing. The structures of textual address within the novel therefore create the terms whereby the reader is positioned as a witness to the proxy-witnesses.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into two sections: “The Voices of the Fugue,” in which I examine how the two-part structure of the novel contains elements of a musical fugue in that it presents voices in a posthumous dialogue where the second voice responds to and addresses the first. The second section, “An Address Overheard,” draws on theory of textual address in order to analyse how textual address is a device used to pass on the moral responsibility to remember and bear witness to the Holocaust. I explore the ethical implications of structuring a text so that its reader is positioned to overhear a persona within world of the text overhearing an address to another. Such structuring, I will

argue, places the reader of the novel in the position of both witness and addressee and, as a result, elicits a response.

2. The Voices of the Fugue

The title of *Fugitive Pieces* has elicited comments in almost every secondary source on the novel. This is due to the fact that the title creates references to many of the novel's themes and concerns. It is not surprising, considering the many references to music and characters that play, listen to and collect music in the novel, that one of the references often read in the title is to that of a musical fugue. Critics refer to the etymology of the word "fugitive," highlighting the elements in common with the word "fugue." By extension, the word "pieces" could then be read as referring to pieces of music. Most critics, however, focus on how the fugal principle applies to the repetitions and variations of themes and motifs within the novel. Rachel Falconer, for example, suggests that *Fugitive Pieces* follows Celan's "Death Fugue" by modelling the fugue form's "repetition of central motifs" (109), while Ellen Fine argues that *Fugitive Pieces* is "written in a style informed by musical rhythms and incantations [...] infused with searing images and multiple themes interwoven throughout the text like musical fugues" (84). Similarly, Gubar remarks that the novel can be seen as "a fuguelike musical piece that imparts lyrical intensity even to the psychological fugues of guilt and grief that accompany Jakob on his evolution towards a series of separate peaces he negotiates with his past" ("Empathic" 255). Furthermore, Neal Bruss has argued that the various discourses of the characters in the novel create a "set of fugal variations on discourse and object relations," as "each of their discourses has elements of fragmentation, stories, listing, elegiac causality

and ethical witnessing” (39). These are all useful ways of considering the thematics at work in Michaels’s novel.

However, not much attention has been paid to exploring the ways in which the structure of the novel contains fugal elements. Only two critics (Gubar and Fine) have made brief mention of how the two-part structure of the novel can be considered fugue-like. Gubar reads the second part of the novel as a coda, which she suggests presents a formal gesture of adoption: “To the extent that the musical performer memorizing the composer’s piece models the adopting and adopted psyche in pieces, it makes sense that a coda follows in part 2 [...] another story entirely and yet not exactly so” (“Empathic” 265). Thus, Gubar suggests, Ben’s part of the novel:

employs a child of survivors to narrate a revision of Jakob’s trajectory that is signalled formally through the recycling of chapter titles. Images of sound (lullabies, piano playing, silences, shrieking weeds), of flooded towns and fearful forests, of women’s scarves and hands, lost siblings, culinary jokes, reading and writing projects – all are recast in a musical variation on the themes of the novel’s first narrative. (“Empathic” 266)

However, aside from mentioning the chapter titles, Gubar is not focusing on the structure of the novel in these comments. Comments by Meredith Criglington and Ellen S. Fine are closer to what I want to argue in this chapter. Although Criglington does not make any mention of specific fugal structures, her comment on the structure of *Fugitive Pieces* is closely related to Fine’s. Criglington writes: “the novel’s fundamental structure is based on the non-biological patrilineal transmission of memory from Athos to Jakob to Ben through their work as writers” (97). I would like to focus here on the connection Criglington draws between the transmission of memory and the act of writing. Similar ideas surface in Fine’s critical work on the novel. Fine argues that *Fugitive Pieces* is based on

intergenerational links: in that one narrative completes the other. She writes: “*Fugitive Pieces* demonstrates that each generation is the memory carrier of the next, each feels responsible for completing and/or bringing into the world the unfinished stories of the next” (Fine 89). Fine sees this as a circular composition of the novel. However, while Fine’s focus is on the uniqueness of the dual perspective of both a hidden child and a second generation child in *Fugitive Pieces*, and the intergenerational links which structure the text, she does not focus specifically on the enactment of the witnessing process within the novel, as she is more concerned with a thematic reading of the text than a discussion of its stylistic or structural makeup. I agree that there are some grounds for Fine’s argument that one narrative completes another: Ben could possibly be seen to complete Jakob’s narrative through the way he adds details to Jakob’s story, passes on his notebooks and both tells the story of his death (in the prologue) and also the story of the effect his life and writing had on others (in part II). I would be hesitant, however, to say that this is a “completing” of Jakob’s story; I am much more comfortable with Fine’s other option, that of “bringing into the world [...] unfinished stories,” as this is, I would argue, the role that Ben plays. I would also like to suggest that the act of bringing unfinished stories into the world is actually more an act of response than an act of writing for another. However, a distinction does need to be made here between the ghostwriting that Jakob undertakes on Athos’s behalf and the proxy-witnessing Ben provides for Jakob.¹⁸ Jakob’s response to Athos’s unfinished work—Athos had not finished his book *Bearing False Witness* when he died—is to use Athos’s notes and his own

¹⁸ Gubar uses the term “ghostwriting” to refer to the writing work that Jakob does in completing Athos’s book (“Empathic” 260).

personal knowledge of the project to complete the book on Athos's behalf: "For the next three years, I compiled Athos's notes on the SS-Ahnenerbe as well as I could. Working in his study, alone now in our flat, I felt Athos's presence so strongly I could smell his pipe, I could feel his hand on my shoulder" (Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* 119). Jakob therefore witnesses on Athos's behalf by completing Athos's written testimony. Interestingly, Jakob writes that Athos knew he would not complete his project: "[Athos] burrowed in his room to work on his book, *Bearing False Witness*, which he knew somehow he would never finish, a debt left unpaid to his colleagues at Biskupin" (*Fugitive Pieces* 103). There is an echo here in Athos's unfinished work to the prologue, in which Jakob is quoted as saying "a man's work, like his life, is never completed" (*Fugitive Pieces* i). Ben, however, does not complete Jakob's unfinished notebooks, but rather responds to their incompleteness with his own response. His work is an act of proxy-witnessing, to use Gubar's term, in that he does not simply finish Jakob's memoirs for him, but his writing relies on, incorporates and responds to Jakob's unfinished work. This method of proxy-witnessing is modelled structurally in the text: Ben presents Jakob's unfinished notebooks in their own part of the text (part I), after having contextualized them in the prologue, and he then follows with his dialogic response in part II of the novel.¹⁹ Ben thus acts as a proxy-witness for Jakob by passing on Jakob's testimony, not completing it.

Structurally, *Fugitive Pieces* displays elements of the fugal form in that the first part of the text presents a primary melody or voice, which is followed by a

¹⁹ My use of the term "dialogic" here is in the sense of a conversation or dialogue. While I consider theories of dialogic writing following Bakhtin and Benveniste at other points in this dissertation, but referring to Ben's part of the novel as dialogic here, I am simply suggesting that it evidences a posthumous dialogue between his writing and that of Jakob's in that it includes extracts of Jakob's writing within Ben's text.

response or answer from a second voice in part II. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines a musical fugue as “a contrapuntal composition in which a short melody or phrase (the subject) is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts.” Following this definition, I suggest that part I can be read as the primary melody (or subject), with Jakob’s voice acting as the primary voice in the fugue; part II, therefore, can be understood as the answering voice, as Ben’s voice responds to Jakob’s. The subsequent voices in a fugue are often referred to as answers or answering voices. The *OED* defines a fugue as follows: “A polyphonic composition constructed on one or more short subjects of themes, which are harmonized according to the laws of counterpoint, and introduced from time to time with various contrapuntal devices.” The layers of Ben’s voice over that of Jakob’s mimics this notion of polyphony. Ben’s answer or response to Jakob’s text is signalled formally through the repetition of some of the chapter titles used in Jakob’s section, which appear in a different order in Ben’s text (See table below).

Part I: Jakob’s Notebooks	Part II: Ben’s response
The Drowned City	The Drowned City
The Stone Carriers	Vertical Time
Vertical Time	Phosphorus
The Way Station	The Way Station
Phosphorus	
Terra Nullius	
The Gradual Instant	

Gubar has referred to this as the “recycling of chapter titles,” which she reads as a formal signal of Ben’s narrative being a “revision of Jakob’s trajectory”

("Empathic" 266). Gubar's argument therefore differs from mine, as she suggests that Ben's part is a revision and not a response or answer, as I suggest. Ben's response to Jakob's text performs a fugal form of imitation, in which one voice repeats the phrases or melodies of a previous voice in a different pitch or variation. Both part I and II begin with the same chapter title—"The Drowned City"—and so, much like a fugue, they begin with the same subject. However, in answering Jakob, Ben's part of the novel begins with the same subject but then proceeds in a different order. Ben uses some of the same chapter titles, but interweaves them in a shorter variation of the primary melody. I am hesitant, however, to agree with Gubar's reading of part II as a coda ("Empathic" 265), as Ben's part neither brings the novel to an explicit conclusion, nor simply provides a recapitulation of part I. Ben's part of the novel ends in the middle, with the very same chapter title—"The Way Station"—that marks the middle of Jakob's section of the novel. There is thus, I argue, no ending off of the narrative, but rather the narrative stops somewhat abruptly in the middle, with plenty of suggestion that Ben's story will continue. Ben's response forms the beginning of an opening out of the text, rather than a recapitulation and wrapping-up of the story (as would be performed in a coda). I will discuss this more in the second section of this chapter.

I read Ben's voice as answering Jakob's—as the second voice in a set of fugal relations. As Ben's part of the novel is explicitly addressed to Jakob, it can be read as a response. While I consider theories of address more closely in the next section of this chapter, I am using the notion of address here as it pertains to the structures inherent in the fugue form. Ben frequently speaks to Jakob using either his name, or just simply the pronoun "you". For example, Ben specifically

addresses Jakob when he describes his mother: “She was a sensualist of proportions you, Jakob Beer, could never even estimate” (Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* 230). Similarly, Ben addresses Jakob when referring to his works: “You died not long after my father and I can’t say which death made me reach again for your words. On Naomi’s desk was your last book, *What Have You Done to Time*, and on mine was *Groundwork*” (*Fugitive Pieces* 255). Through his explicit address of Jakob, Ben signals the dialogic response at work in his writing.²⁰ Not only does Ben refer to Jakob as “you,” but he also frequently uses quotations from both Jakob’s poetry and his notebooks within his own memoirs. These passages are placed in italics in order to differentiate between Ben’s own writing and his use of Jakob’s texts (as is also the case with the passage used as the epigraph for this chapter). Through textually weaving Jakob’s narrative together with his own, Ben signals the posthumous conversation taking place:

Every day I discovered another talisman of beauty, clues of the life you and Michaela shared: stubs of candles, hard pools of wax in shelters of rock in the garden where you must have sat together at night, no doubt your *cleft of stone opened by flame*. Your images were everywhere. [...] Your poems from those few years with Michaela, poems of a man who feels, for the first time, a future. Your words and your life no longer separate, after *decades of hiding in your skin*. (*Fugitive Pieces* 266-267)

The fact that Jakob’s text and his chapter titles are woven into Ben’s part of the text gives the novel precisely that fugal texture of interweaving voices: where different voices are heard simultaneously as they speak to one another. Thus, where Jakob completes Athos’s text as a ghostwriter of posthumous testimony, as Gubar argues, Ben’s method of proxy-witnessing is significantly different. Ben presents a posthumous dialogue; he does not write on behalf of Jakob, but rather

²⁰ Coffey makes brief mention of the novel’s “lyric, digressive and dialogic structure” (Coffey 29), although she does not offer any further analysis of how the dialogue is played out within the text.

passes on Jakob's unfinished testimony while including his own response alongside it.

3. An Address Overheard

The fugal resonances inherent in the structure of *Fugitive Pieces* highlight the ways in which voices address and respond to one another within the text. I therefore turn my discussion to consider how *Fugitive Pieces* might build on theories of literary address. In her book, *J.M Coetzee: Countervoices*, Carol Clarkson explores the ethics and aesthetics of literary address in a chapter titled "You." In this chapter, Clarkson argues that the material existence of the literary text instantiates an I-you encounter between the author of the text and its reader. Clarkson's argument follows that of Buber, who writes that "When one says You, the I of the word pair I-You is said, too" (Buber 54). Clarkson's own argument follows what she describes as a palimpsestic approach, in that her discussion of Coetzee's aesthetics and her conceptualization of literary address follow the debates and conversations between Celan, Buber, Derrida, Benveniste, Blanchot, Levinas, and Lacoue-Labarthe. Following Benveniste's understanding of the way pronouns refer to the utterance, Clarkson writes: "If 'I' and 'you' are embodied in relation to a discourse, rather than to an objective, static reality, then a literary text can be understood to be the site that *instantiates* an I-you relation, in each event of its being read" (*Countervoices* 58). Indeed, Walter Kaufmann writes something very similar in his preface to Buber's work: "we must *learn to feel addressed by a book*, by the human being behind it, as if a person spoke directly to us. A good book or essay or poem is not primarily an object to be put to us, or an object to experience: it is the voice of You speaking to

me, requiring a response” (Kaufmann in Buber 39). That the text addresses us and requires a response is the core of the theories of literary address. Clarkson writes:

the *potential* embodiment of you and I in relation to the discourse brings about a peculiar understanding of the responsive engagements that the writing initiates. To write is to initiate the possibility of the word’s being read. It is to *invent* the possibility of a reader, of readers, of a shifting and incrementally more intricate network of paths from I to you, in a diachronous movement through time and space. (*Countervoices* 58-59)

Clarkson’s emphasis here on the way in which the address of a text creates a network through time by calling forth potential addressees brings us back once again to the metaphor of the fugue. Consider how the primary melody or voice of a fugue works in a similar sense: it calls forth responses. By staging the primary melody, the first voice of the fugue sets up the terms of response; voices respond to and imitate the melody of the fugue in a similar “intricate network of paths from ‘I’ [here the primary melody works as the I] to you [the voices which respond] in a diachronous movement through time and space” (Clarkson, *Countervoices* 59); or, furthering the fugal metaphor, through the space of the piece of music. Indeed, Levinas speaks of the texture of Celan’s poems as embodying the fugal element of counterpoint. Levinas sees evidence of this in Celan’s *The Meridian* and he suggests that the texture of this speech embodies “Celan’s [...] poetic act” (Levinas “Paul Celan” 41). He describes Celan’s poetic act as follows: “An elliptic, allusive text, constantly interrupting itself in order to let through, in the interruptions, his other voice, as if two or more discourses were on top of one another, with a strange coherence, not that of dialogue, but woven in a *counterpoint* that constitutes—despite their immediate melodic unity—the

texture of his poems" ("Paul Celan" 41; emphasis mine). Levinas therefore describes Celan's poems as moving "toward the other" ("Paul Celan" 41). However, the texture of Celan's *Meridian* speech stages counterpoint with one voice—as Levinas says, it "constantly interrupts itself." *Fugitive Pieces* creates a similar texture, but uses more than one voice to do so.

If a literary text constitutes an address at its most basic level of materiality, what then of a literary text which includes an explicit address within the world of the text itself? Clarkson poses this question, with specific reference to Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron* and Paul Celan's poetry. She writes:

The 'you' as addressee of the literary work as a whole gains another dimension when a persona *within* the world of the novel or the poem is explicitly addressed as 'you': the reader then becomes a third party, a 'he' or 'she' in the grammatical position of the third person, *overhearing* the address from 'I' to 'you' *within* the world of the literary work, but at the same time, feeling the effects of being called upon as addressee of that utterance (the ability to respond to being called 'you', as we have learnt from Benveniste, presupposes a presence to the site of the discourse). But quite apart from this, the reader is the second-person addressee called to attention by the literary work as a whole (irrespective of any use of the word 'you' within the text itself). (Clarkson, *Countervoices* 61)

What Clarkson continues to explore, is how this dual position of the reader, as both addressee at the level of the materiality of the text and as the third person overhearing an address within the world of the text, may have a significant ethical effect on the reader: "The use of a persona-addressee thus has the unnerving effect of placing the reader simultaneously in the grammatical position of the second and the third persons, at once present and absent with respect to a double-directedness and mutually exclusive trajectory of address" (*Countervoices* 61). When the reader overhears an address to another "you"

within the text, the reader is positioned to question whether they are, to some extent, included within the pronoun “you”. Here Clarkson turns to Celan’s poetry by way of explanation: “A reading of Celan’s poetry, with its staging of anguished appeals to a ‘you’ within the poems themselves, has a vertiginous effect on the reader: am *I* the one appealed to, or called to account? Am *I* the survivor, or the beloved thus addressed? How should I respond with justice, and to whom?” (*Countervoices* 61-62). Questions of response are key to this discussion of literary address, as the response from the reader of a text addressed to “you” is impossible to avoid. Even a refusal to respond is in and of itself an instance of non-response (Clarkson, *Countervoices* 65). Questions of response are also at the centre of the inquiry of this thesis, for the response of the second generation determines whether or not the memory of the Holocaust will be passed on and how it will be passed on. Clarkson provides a further textual example in Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*, a pertinent novel for this discussion of *Fugitive Pieces* in that the entire text of *Age of Iron* is written as a letter and therefore as an explicit address. She writes:

I would say we experience something similar to this [the address in Celan’s poetry] in a reading of *Age of Iron*. On the one hand we *become* the recipient of Mrs Curren’s letter (the letter comprises the entire text of the novel); we become the ‘you’ that the letter instantiates. “To whom this writing then?” asks the Mrs Curren of *Age of Iron*. “The answer: to you but not to you; to me, to you in me”, and ‘These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on’ (*Age of Iron* 6, 131). It is difficult to distance *oneself* from these reflective acts of embodiment in the very real and present instant of reading the words on the page. (*Countervoices* 62)

Clarkson argues that because the reader of *Age of Iron* knows that Mrs Curren is writing this letter on her deathbed, and that the letter might never reach its

intended recipient (her daughter), the reader is placed in a specific ethical position of one who overhears. Clarkson suggests that certain questions therefore arise for the reader: “How to do justice to an appeal which we have overheard, witnessed, how to become ‘I’, and say ‘You’ (in Buber’s sense) to Mrs Curren, when we are powerless to change the direction of the axis of utterance and response, of writer and reader, of speaker and addressee?” (*Countervoices* 62). That the novel, and Mrs Curren’s letter, is calling to the reader from within the fictional realm, does not diminish the ethical effect of Coetzee’s work. The call to justice still creates the site of response, or even non-response, on the event of its being read and overheard.

I turn here again to my discussion of *Fugitive Pieces*: following Clarkson’s argument, we can accept that *Fugitive Pieces*’ textual materiality constitutes an address to its reader. However, much like *Age of Iron*, there are many instances of address within the world of the text (some of which I have already touched on in the previous section), which create the terms for the experience of double-directedness Clarkson speaks of, in which the reader of the novel is addressed and becomes one who overhears an address. In part I, for example, Jakob Beer’s notebooks contain different instances of address. Jakob addresses his lost, and presumably dead, sister Bella with phrases such as “*Bella, my brokenness has kept you broken*” (*Fugitive Pieces* 169; original emphasis). Jakob also addresses those who perished in the Holocaust, especially the nameless: “Forgive me, *you* who were born and died without being given names” (*Fugitive Pieces* 168, emphasis mine). Furthermore, towards the end of his unfinished notebooks, Jakob broadens the scope of his address to include all those close to him: “Each morning I write these words for *you all*. For Bella and Athos, for Alex, for Maurice

and Irena, for Michaela" (*Fugitive Pieces* 191; emphasis mine). And, gesturing to the future, Jakob's notebooks also contain an explicit address to his future child; he writes: "Child I long for: if we conceive you, if you are born, if you reach the age I am now, sixty, I say this to you: Light the lamps but do not look for us. Think of us sometimes [...] You, my son, Bela [...] Or you, Bella, my daughter [...]" (*Fugitive Pieces* 194). Indeed, part I ends with a specific address to this unborn, although already named, child: "My son, my daughter: May *you* never be deaf to love. Bela, Bella: Once I was lost in a forest. I was so afraid. My blood pounded in my chest and I knew my heart's strength would soon be exhausted. I saved myself without thinking. I grasped the two syllables closest to me, and replaced my heartbeat with *your* name" (*Fugitive Pieces* 195; emphasis mine). What is interesting here, is the way in which the final address of part I of the novel includes both the dead and also the unborn within the name "Bella": Jakob's dead sister, the ghost who has haunted him, is replaced with the dream of future generations, thus turning the address to the intended future reader: Jakob's heir. The effect on the reader, who overhears such an address, is to create the terms whereby the reader becomes witness to both the deceased sister and also to the unborn child.

However, as Ben is the first to discover Jakob's notebooks, he becomes the first reader placed in the position of the one who overhears the layers of address, thus becoming witness to them. Ben finds himself in a similar situation to the reader of *Age of Iron*: he reads Jakob's texts, knowing that Jakob and Michaela are both dead and that their unborn child will never be the addressee as intended. However, as this overhearing takes place *within* part II of the novel, Michaels's text complicates this vertiginous space of double-directedness even further than

that which Clarkson explores in Coetzee. In *Fugitive Pieces* there is a persona *within* the world of the novel (Ben) who is both addressed as reader and also is positioned to overhear an address *within* the world of the novel. The staging of an address as well as a persona overhearing it *within* the text further complicates the vertiginous position of the reader of the text. It adds yet another layer to the experience of overhearing, as the reader, who stands *outside* of the novel, overhears not just one address, but an address *and* a persona overhearing it. The textual layering of voices that address one another within the world of the text therefore creates further dimensions of address both within and without the novel.

However, where a reading of *Fugitive Pieces* adds to this discussion, is that it presents Ben's response to these instances of address in part II: as both witness and also as one who overhears. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, the fugal layers of address within the text of *Fugitive Pieces* include Ben's answer to Jakob. Upon reading Jakob's notebooks, Ben is placed in the position of both the addressee, the "you" of Jakob's text, as well as the position of the one who overhears Jakob's address to his deceased sister, his wife, his friends and his unborn child. The reading of Jakob's notebooks therefore places Ben in the site of address and creates the terms of response. The host of ghostly recipients who cannot hear Jakob's address further creates a sense of responsibility in Ben when his reading activates his overhearing. He is aware that Jakob's memoirs can never be read by his wife or his unborn child. Ben responds by writing his section of the novel, which is, as I have already discussed in the previous section, explicitly addressed to Jakob. Early on in his section, Ben addresses Jakob, acknowledging the influence Jakob's poetry has had on him. Ben writes:

I'd never heard of you until, in class, Salman recommended your book of poems, *Groundwork*, and recited the opening lines. Later I saw that the book was dedicated to the memory of your parents and your sister, Bella. *My love for my family has grown for years in decay-fed soil, an unwashed root pulled suddenly from the ground. Bulbous as a beet, a huge eye under a lid of earth. Scoop out the eye, blind the earth.*

I know that the more one loves a man's words, the more one can assume he's put everything into his work that he couldn't put into his life. [...] But, in your case, there seemed to be no gap between the poems and the man. How could it be otherwise, for a man who claimed to believe so completely in language? Who knew that even one letter— like the 'J' stamped on a passport—could have the power of life or death. (*Fugitive Pieces* 206 – 207)²¹

This passage overflows with references to a "you"; it is very clearly directed to Jakob. As I have already mentioned, Ben's use of Jakob's quotes (in italics in the above passage) within his writing signal the posthumous dialogue taking place within Ben's response. They work as a form of proxy-witnessing, in that they incorporate the original text into the fabric of their belated witnessing. Ben's text, therefore, both conjures Jakob's voice and answers it.

I would like to propose that while Ben's section of the novel is addressed to Jakob, it is also an address to "you," the reader, in more than just the instance of its textual materiality. From as early as the fourth paragraph of Ben's version of "The Drowned City," his narrative contains an address to an unspecified "you": "If *you* descend the short, steep bank to the water, *you'll* see, past the glinting surface, the river bottom glinting too. If *you* turn around to look at the muddy escarpment, or simply look down at *your* feet, *you'll* begin to notice the Humber's distinct sediment, laid down in October 1954" (*Fugitive Pieces* 202; emphasis

²¹ While Gubar would like to argue that the dedication 'for J' at the beginning of *Fugitive Pieces* signals Michaels's ghostwriting on behalf of Jakob, I argue that, together with this remark of Ben's, it works as another example of Ben's authorial position in the novel.

mine). It is unclear who this “you” is in these passages. Yet, as this address turns quickly into an explicit address to Jakob (just less than 4 pages later), it seems that this unspecified “you” should be read as a reference to Jakob. However, I would like to propose that Ben’s address to Jakob contains an embedded awareness of address to the reader, as there are many instances where Ben writes to a “you” whose boundaries extend further than those of the explicit addressee: Jakob. Ben describes aspects of Jakob’s home on Idhra, for example, which would be unnecessary to include if his address was to Jakob alone, as Jakob would know such details. In his section titled “Vertical Time,” Ben writes: “I began to go through your library: immense in scope and size, climbing almost every wall of the house. Books on the aurora borealis, on meteorites, on fogbows. On topiary [...] The most vigorous collection of poetry I’ve ever seen, in Greek, Hebrew, English, Spanish” (*Fugitive Pieces* 261-262). Ben’s description, addressed to Jakob, of what Jakob has in his own library, signals the silent presence of a wider group of addressees. Moreover, Ben provides an explanation of the master’s thesis of Jakob’s wife, Michaela, which Jakob would be familiar with (*Fugitive Pieces* 262). Descriptions such as these are, I argue, included for someone other than Jakob, and, as a result, Ben’s use of the pronoun “you” often extends to both Jakob and also to you, the reader.

One possible reason for the dual address in Ben’s section of the novel therefore, is that many of the addresses in *Fugitive Pieces* are directed to those who are already dead and therefore necessarily go unanswered. Such unanswered addresses seem to carry an even heavier weight of responsibility for those who overhear them. I return to questions Clarkson asked about *Age of Iron*, considering how they might pertain to *Fugitive Pieces*, while also taking into

account the added dimension of address inherent in the dual voices of the novel's structure. To repeat, Clarkson argues that upon reading an address that will possibly go unanswered, the reader is placed in a specific ethical position of one who overhears this address and is therefore prompted to respond to what they have witnessed. Clarkson writes: "linguistic choices on the part of the writer set up different conditions of possibility for the ways of relating I to you, both within the worlds of the fictional narratives themselves, and in terms of the 'I-you' relation between writer and reader. For example, what relation of power, or what conditions for a site of response are set up by the terms of address?" (54). Where Mrs Curren writes a letter to her daughter, which, as Clarkson has pointed out, may never reach its recipient, Ben's response purposefully stages an address of the dead. *Fugitive Pieces*, therefore, stages an address which will *necessarily* remain unanswered; is meant to be overheard more than it is meant to reach its expressed addressee. As Jakob's addresses to his unborn child increase towards the end of his unfinished memoirs, we can assume that he intended his memoirs to be read and responded to by his heir. Whereas Ben, as one who already writes in response to an address which he has overheard, addresses Jakob, whom he knows to be dead, while also directing his address to the reader, whom he knows will become witness to both Jakob's text (as it is published together with Ben's) and his own. Both Jakob and Ben, therefore, include a future reader in their addresses, thus creating a way in which the address to the dead can be passed on by the living.

The terms of address in the two-part structure of *Fugitive Pieces* demonstrate a persona *within* the text responding to an address, while simultaneously creating a site of response for the reader. As one who bears the

responsibility of overhearing an unanswered address, Ben responds as a witness to Jakob's text in such a way as to create space for further witnesses—further voices who may choose to answer. By modelling one way of responding to an address overheard, Ben's part of the text functions as an example to the reader at the same time that it calls for the reader's response. As such, it works like the voices of a fugue: within the text the reader is presented with the primary melody and one of the attempted answers. The text, however, in its incompleteness, remains open for more voices to join in and create their own responses, variations and imitations. I conclude by suggesting that while *Fugitive Pieces* is structured so as to position its reader as a witness to the witness, the text is also structured so as to include the reader in a genealogy of those who respond: Ben models a proxy-witness type response while also creating space for the reader to respond. While I have been attentive to the musicality of the layering of voices in this chapter and have considered the way they create a site of address within the text, in the following chapter I shift my focus to consider Michaels's preoccupation with the aesthetic function of language. As a poet and a musician, Michaels's acute awareness of the voice and musicality of her text informs her use of language: her prose in her essays and her novel is densely lyrical. However, as I will examine, it is also strategically fragmented.

Chapter 2: “Language is broken, bulky, dissolute”: Anne Michaels’s Aesthetic of Fragmentation

Language is artificial, of course, relying on juxtaposition to represent the world, just as the artist draws the imaginary line around the apple to create the illusion of its shape, to give the illusion of its depth.

The poetic line is a boundary, a vessel; it can be made well and sing its tension. But ultimately the poem itself is a loose net, a sieve, both unviable and durable as a physical object: a web of molecules that gives the illusion of wholeness. A net of densities. (Michaels, “Cleopatra’s Love” 180-181)

1. Introduction

Fugitive Pieces is a poet’s novel about a post-Holocaust poet who wrestles and struggles with language in his attempts to find the appropriate mode to write about his experiences. Poetry is Jakob’s way of returning to traumatic memories and attempting to make meaning out of them:

[I]n poems I returned to Biskupin, to the house on Zakynthos, to the forest, to the river, to the burst door, to the minutes in the wall.

English was a sonar, a microscope, through which I listened and observed, waiting to capture elusive meanings buried in facts. I wanted a line in a poem to be the hollow ney of the dervish orchestra whose plaintive wail is a call to God. But all I achieved was awkward shrieking. Not even the pure shriek of a reed in the rain. (*Fugitive Pieces* 111-112)

Even in speaking about his poetic attempts, Jakob uses language which is densely poetic and laden with metaphors. In this passage alone, language is compared to a “sonar” and a “microscope,” and poetry to “wail[s]”, “hollow ney[s]” “call[s] to God” and “awkward shriek[s]”. Jakob’s awkward shrieking speaks of his wrestling with a language that is ruined by history. His poetic experiments register the tension—facing all who write in the wake of the Holocaust—between remaining silent or using tainted language. Jakob, however, cannot

remain silent; he confesses: “I did not know how to seek by way of silence. So I lived a breath apart, a touch-typist who holds his hands above the keys slightly in the wrong place, the words coming out meaningless, garbled [...] I thought of writing poems this way, in code, every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language” (*Fugitive Pieces* 111). Jakob’s struggles follow a tradition of post-Holocaust poets, such as Paul Celan, who have recoiled from *and yet* sought out language in attempts to speak of their traumatic experiences. Michaels’s novel therefore situates itself within debates about the nature of literary aesthetics and artistic representation after the Holocaust—debates in which Theodor Adorno and Paul Celan are key figures. However, while Michaels’s novel is densely lyrical and relies heavily on extended metaphor, I do not read *Fugitive Pieces* as a “retort” or a “response” to Adorno’s famous pronouncement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, *Prisms* 34).²² Although many critics have suggested that this is the motivation behind Michaels’s poetic novel, in this chapter I suggest that this predictable critical response to Michaels’s text is, in fact, based on a misreading of Adorno.²³

Adorno was not arguing against or placing a ban on poetry, as is so often assumed, but rather he was outlining the potentially *productive* space of barbaric poetry (or, more broadly, literature and art) as a way in which to provoke effective cultural criticism. In this chapter, therefore, I will explore the ways in which Michaels’s use of fragmentation (in her chapters, sections and sentences) can be considered what I conceptualise as being “productively barbaric,” to

²² Adorno’s dictum is from his essay “Cultural Criticism and Society.” For the purposes of this chapter, I limit my discussion of Adorno to this essay.

²³ Critics who refer to Adorno’s dictum in their discussions of *Fugitive Pieces* include Bentley (1997), Cook (2000), Gubar (2002) and Bruss (2003). I pay more detailed attention to their use of Adorno in the next section.

borrow and extend Adorno's term. My conceptualization of a poetry which is "productively barbaric" is based on my reading of the texture of Adorno's method.²⁴ Such a form of poetry needs to employ a mode of poetic writing which performs "a self-critical dismantling from within," as Alex Thomson explains it (Thomson 30). The effect is "barbaric" in that it is unsettling to the point that it provokes a different kind of engagement on the part of the reader. Such self-reflexivity can be seen in Jakob's desire to "wreck" the language in order for language to be able to speak of loss and wreckage.

I begin this chapter by examining how Adorno has been misused in critical discussions of *Fugitive Pieces*. I then trace a progression of thought from Walter Benjamin to Adorno in order to examine the dialectical method within which Adorno's dictum takes its place. I argue that a deeper understanding of Adorno's method actually illuminates the aesthetic strategies at work in Michaels's novel. By "aesthetic," I mean the "set of principles underlying the work of a particular artist or artistic movement" (*OED Online*). In examining what I call Michaels's "aesthetic of fragmentation," I explore how Michaels's use of language is acutely self-conscious and therefore "productively barbaric": her work stages the tension between the necessity of language in representation and the writer's awareness of its limitations and lacks. Jakob's suggestion that he needs to "wreck" language in order to use it to perform "awkward shrieking" leads me to explore how Paul Celan's wrestles with language might also inform Michaels's aesthetic principles and in the course of this discussion I draw attention to the

²⁴ While I use the word "poetry" here, I am not suggesting that Adorno was only speaking about poetry; Adorno used the word to speak of literature in the broadest sense. However, it seems that Adorno's use of the word "poetry" in his famous dictum has often mislead his readers to read his proclamation as a ban on poetry, and poetic language, specifically. Furthermore, it is Adorno's use of the word "poetry" that has also led so many of Michaels's critics to reference his dictum when speaking about her highly poetic language in *Fugitive Pieces*.

points of contact between Adorno, Celan and Michaels's aesthetic strategies to consider how each writer's work might be considered a form of "barbaric" poetry.

2. A Retort to Adorno?

Quite a few of Anne Michaels's critics make reference to Adorno in their discussions of *Fugitive Pieces*. The majority of these critics, though, only quote Adorno's famous dictum, and, for the most part, misappropriate it in their haste to argue for the importance of poetry after Auschwitz or discuss the ethical challenges Auschwitz poses. D. M. R Bentley, for example, places *Fugitive Pieces* in direct opposition to Adorno. He uses Adorno's pronouncement as the epigraph for his paper, in which he suggests that:

[a]s a work of poetic knowing whose principal character, Jakob Beer, 'moves toward a place of love in the world' [...] *Fugitive Pieces* not only defies Adorno's 1955 pronouncement that '[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (*Prisms* 34), but also provides an affirmative answer to his subsequent 'cultural question [of] whether after Auschwitz you can go on living' (*Negative Dialectics* 363). (Bentley 2)

However, Bentley provides no further discussion of Adorno in his paper and so the dictum is used without any reference to the larger dialectic in which it takes its place. Susan Gubar reads *Fugitive Pieces* through a feminist lens in order to examine how the novel "reinterprets traditionally male-dominated approaches to the Shoah" ("Empathic" 250). She suggests that *Fugitive Pieces* presents "a defence of poetry after Auschwitz. A retort to Theodor Adorno's famous injunction, *Fugitive Pieces* proposes that after the Holocaust it is barbaric *not* to write and read literature so as to counter 'the quintessence of virility' with

altered definitions of manhood” (“Empathic” 251). Gubar’s language here is very similar to that of Bentley’s: the focus is on Michaels offering a “retort” or “defence of poetry”, which reveals the misunderstanding that Adorno was calling for the abolition of poetry. Gubar does, however, complicate her position somewhat in the footnote to the above text, in which she acknowledges Adorno’s later responses to his maxim: “Theodor Adorno qualified his own maxim in 1962: ‘I have no wish to soften the saying that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,’ he stated; however, he went on to explain, ‘it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it’ (1982, 312)” (“Empathic” 251). All Gubar provides by way of explanation is a further brief comment on how all of Michaels’s characters are writers who vacillate between silence and compulsive studies that lead to writing. She does not discuss this further, however, leaving this revision of Adorno to a footnote, which results in her main reference being a distortion of Adorno’s phrase. Thus Gubar does not provide any insight into how Michaels might actually be engaging with Adorno through her characters’ vacillations.

Neal Bruss’s and Méira Cook’s references to Adorno seem to acknowledge that Michaels’s novel engages the provocation inherent in Adorno’s dictum. Bruss refers briefly to Cook’s argument that, “Jakob’s writing, and *Fugitive Pieces*, can be taken as responsive to Theodor Adorno’s statement in *Prisms* that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’” (Bruss 22). Bruss suggests that *Fugitive Pieces*, “meet[s] what Cook calls Adorno’s ‘implicit challenge’ as narrative ‘overwhelmed by events that refuse to settle into coherence, understanding, or knowledge,’ a narrative which avoids ‘a betrayal of both history and the victim’ (Cook 13)” (22). Bruss does not, however, offer any

further discussion of Adorno, and so his reference to Adorno here remains a brief suggestion that *Fugitive Pieces* might be read as engaging in Adorno's challenge. How the novel does so, however, is not explored. Cook's discussion of *Fugitive Pieces*, which Bruss refers to, presents a more nuanced understanding of Adorno's pronouncement as an invitation to the writer:

Theodor Adorno's famous dictum [...] is not merely an indictment against lyric poetry as a genre but against all literature, a stern warning to all writing that in the wake of the Holocaust it must find new ways to represent the elisions and failures of grief when it is used as a system of discourse. The problem of writing *after* is also the problem of how to represent the impossible event faithfully while avoiding a betrayal both of history and of the victim. (Cook 12)

The problem of representation—of possible betrayal—is at the heart of the debate about affective forms of writing after the Holocaust. Cook's use of Adorno therefore seems to be more aware of these nuances: she does acknowledge that what appears at first to be a condemnation of all literature, turns out to be the articulation of a problem which is posed as a challenge. The challenge becomes an imperative: writing needs to find new ways of representation. Cook suggests that the genre of testimony provides one response to the need to find new ways of writing. She writes: "As a genre that tries to accommodate the impossible nature of representation, the testimony is composed of fragmentation and memory, in which the attempt at narrative is overwhelmed by events that refuse to settle into coherence, understanding, or knowledge" (Cook 12). If testimony is essentially fragmented, as Cook argues, then Michaels's fictional testimony in *Fugitive Pieces* aligns itself with this genre. Cook writes: "[i]n her arrangement of memory and history as necessarily fragmented and in her use of poetic voice to articulate the vicissitudes of lived experience, Michaels's novel is [...] a response

to Adorno's implicit challenge: if it is no longer possible to write after Auschwitz, is the only alternative to remain silent?" (Cook 12-13). Following Cook, I explore more closely just how Michaels's use of fragmentation presents an alternative to remaining silent.

3. Barbaric Poetry

According to Michael Rothberg, Adorno's essay, "Cultural Criticism and Society," was one of the first to suggest the impact of the events of the Holocaust on literature, philosophy and art (25), which is presumably why critics feel the need to include a brief mention of Adorno in any discussion of representation after Auschwitz. Rothberg points out that as a result of its provocation, "Adorno's phrase (not even a full sentence in the original German) has been quoted, and just as often misquoted, by writers working in a variety of contexts and disciplines, including philosophy, theology, aesthetics, and literary criticism" (25). However, despite its popularity, Rothberg suggests that Adorno's dictum has rarely "been read closely" (25). Because Adorno's phrase has been taken in isolation, his words have often been distorted; Rothberg cites two primary examples of this distortion in literary criticism: George Steiner's "No poetry after Auschwitz" and Shoshana Felman's "After Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems" (cited in Rothberg 25). One of the primary reasons for the misreading of Adorno's dictum is that it has been read as an aphorism, and not as a point which takes its place within a philosophical dialectic. Alex Thomson's introduction to Adorno, subtitled "a guide for the perplexed," refers to the popular use of Adorno's dictum as typical of the tendency towards misunderstanding Adorno's dialectical method. "Because Adorno's thought is

dialectical,” Thomson explains, “—it aims to be always in movement—the points at which it appears to come to rest in what are often memorable aphorisms should not be taken for conclusions” (122). Thus taking a phrase in isolation from a larger dialectic constitutes a misunderstanding of the genre.

Adorno’s provocative phrase draws on another dialectical remark made by Walter Benjamin in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”. In this essay Benjamin explores how the history of civilization is simultaneously a history of the barbaric conquests of the victor, which leads him to state: “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (*Illuminations* 256). The historical materialist, Benjamin argues, needs to see the history of suffering within the cultural treasures which he studies. He must be able to disassociate himself in order to see the barbarism within the cultural objects of civilization. Benjamin’s remark reveals how civilization and barbarism were always already mutually constitutive—formed in a dialectical relationship. By echoing Benjamin, Adorno therefore points to the dialectical tension he explores.

In his essay “Cultural Criticism and Society,” Adorno was not arguing against poetry, as many have presumed, but rather he was gesturing towards the potentially productive space of barbaric poetry as a way in which to provoke effective cultural criticism. Adorno was calling for a “self-reflexivity about culture in the wake of catastrophe” (Rothberg 20). He argued that the mass produced cultural art forms of the day were no longer able to elicit productive engagements or provoke thought. Through his dialectical method, Adorno reveals that culture has become fully integrated with the economic agenda of society. He writes: “Because the existence of cultural criticism, no matter what its

content, depends on the economic system, it is involved in the fate of the system" (*Prisms* 25). Cultural criticism necessarily reflects the interests of the system, therefore validating the system. Adorno thus argued that the current forms of cultural criticism perpetuated a "civilized barbarism" in which cultural critics covered over the "retarded state of society" by misreading materialism as indicative of "the advanced state of the human spirit" (*Prisms* 24-25). Thus, following Benjamin, Adorno attempts a mode of critique that is productive because it is able to unsettle; he unmask "civilized barbarism" as a sign of the "retarded state" of a society unable to engage in any self-reflexivity. Adorno shows (both through his ideas and their stylistic portrayal) that a truly self-reflexive engagement with culture requires a dialectical approach: one that holds cultural criticism in tension, as cultural criticism is only productive as far as it is able to bring "untruth to consciousness itself" (*Prisms* 28). But this tension, and the resultant revealing of "untruth," is unsettling for the reader. Adorno's dialectical method offers a model of a form of self-reflexivity: it reveals the negatives of two seemingly opposing positions simultaneously, while still holding them in tension. The effect of such a method is a productive unsettlement. The reader is unsettled through the way in which such a method unmasks negatives, yet continues to use them productively through juxtaposing them with other unmasked or negative positions.

Adorno's dialectical method aimed to avoid what he called "reification": the concretization of that which is abstract (*Prisms* 31). Reification is contrary to dialectics in that it attempts to take what is abstract and make it more concrete. Adorno writes:

Dialectics cannot, therefore, permit any insistence on logical

neatness to encroach on its right to go from one *genus* to another, to shed light on an object in itself hermetic by casting a glance at society, to present society with the bill which the object does not redeem. Finally, the very opposition between knowledge which permeates from without and that which bores from within becomes suspect to the dialectical method, which sees in it a symptom of precisely that reification which the dialectic is obliged to accuse. (*Prisms* 33)

Adorno's aversion to reification is made clear through the negatively charged words he uses above, such as "suspect" and "symptom," while words such as "obliged" and "accuse" reveal the imperatives of the dialectic method. As a method, dialectics itself is potentially subject to reification, unless it, too, is constantly called into question. For Adorno, reification begins when theory "renounce[s] a spontaneous relationship to the object" (*Prisms* 33). As such, "[d]ialectics must guard against this no less than against enthrallment in the cultural object. It can subscribe neither to the cult of the mind nor to hatred of it. The dialectical critic of culture must both participate in culture and not participate. Only then does he do justice to his object and to himself" (*Prisms* 33). Here Adorno outlines the difficult task facing the dialectical critic of culture who must maintain the tension between participating and not participating in culture. Only from within this site of tension can the critic perform the necessarily self-reflexive critique of culture. This position, however, seems paradoxical: how can the critics both participate and not participate? Thomson explains: "Adorno's strategy is to sustain such criticism of the modern world, but to juxtapose it with criticism of any proposed solutions. By matching a negative with another negative, as it were, rather than seeking to replace it with a false positive, Adorno hopes to release an image of what else might be possible" (Thomson 30). The image that Adorno hopes to release, however, is an image of juxtaposition—an

image held in tension. Adorno writes: “What distinguishes dialectical from cultural criticism is that it heightens cultural criticism until the notion of culture is itself negated, fulfilled and surmounted in one” (*Prisms* 28-29). Thus, through bringing the notion of culture to its limits, the dialectical approach performs a “vital self-critical dismantling of [...] culture from within, confronted by its own irreconcilable contradictions” (Thomson 30). Such a method of critique is productive in that the effect of being confronted with irreconcilable contradictions held together in tension forces the reader into the self-reflexive space that Adorno is calling for.

It is Adorno’s method, therefore, which is the key to understanding his works, as his dialectical method embodies the very texture of his philosophy. The reader who seeks to distil Adorno’s argument approaches it from precisely that place of reification that it evades. As a result, such readers misappropriate Adorno’s work in their efforts to read resolution into his dialectic. Thomson explains: “It is often hard to locate Adorno’s argument because he does not simply take a single position, but juxtaposes two or more” (29). With reference to Adorno’s essay in which his famous dictum appears, Thomson explains how “Adorno attempts to model the dialectical tensions between—in this case—immanent and transcendental versions of critique,” showing how “[n]either answer is wholly adequate because incomplete. Adorno [does not] resolve the dialectic into some fuller model of intellectual endeavour: the two arguments are simply juxtaposed, as if to bring out and intensify their antagonism” (Thomson 29-30). However, it is precisely the powerfully affective nature of Adorno’s use of juxtaposition without resolution, which lends itself to ready misappropriation. Thus, the challenge for Adorno’s readers is to take in his dialectic in its entirety,

rather than appropriating one or two of his phrases as if they were meant to be aphorisms. Scholars and translators of Adorno, such as Andrew Fagan and Samuel M. Weber, pay particular attention to Adorno's use of language as a key stylistic device which portrays his critique of society. Fagan writes:

Adorno can be very difficult to read. He writes in a manner that does not lend itself to ready comprehension. This is intentional. *Adorno views language itself as having become an object of, and vehicle for, the perpetuation of domination.* In attempting to encourage critical awareness of suffering and domination, Adorno is forced to use the very means by which these conditions are, to a certain extent, sustained. His answer to this problem, although not intended to be ultimately satisfying, is *to write in a way that requires hard and concentrated efforts on the part of the reader*, to write in a way that explicitly defies convention and the familiar. [...] He aims to show, in a manner very similar to contemporary deconstructionists, the extent to which our linguistic conventions simultaneously both represent and misrepresent reality. (Fagan n. pag)

Fagan's description of Adorno's self-critical use of language here recalls Paul Celan's struggles with the way the Nazi legacy became intimately registered within the German language. Weber also writes about Adorno's struggle with language: "If Adorno appears to do violence to ordinary German, it is as shock therapy which legitimizes itself in exposing the violence that language has already inflicted upon itself" (14). Like Celan, Adorno was aware of the history of barbarism inherent in language. It is Fagan's emphasis on Adorno's barbaric use of language—which is productive in that it "requires hard and concentrated efforts on the part of the reader"—which I would like to keep in mind as I move to discuss Anne Michaels's approach to language as outlined in her essays and performed in *Fugitive Pieces*.

4. The Effective Failures of Language

In both her prose essays and her novel, Michaels displays a highly self-conscious mistrust of language, which is, I will argue, an effective way of maintaining the tension between the necessary use of language in the process of literary forms of representation and the inherent pitfalls and obvious inadequacies of the same medium. Michaels's fascination with metaphor and poetic language is as much a preoccupation in her critical writing as it is in her poetry and her novel. As a result, in my reflection of Michaels's aesthetic, I broaden the scope of my discussion to include a close examination of her critical writing. Michaels is therefore exploring the same tensions and difficulties with language which concerned Adorno and provoked his dialectical stylistic. As I will show in this section, a close analysis of Michaels's stylistic reveals its many similarities with Adorno's method. Michaels's essay, "Cleopatra's Love," written for a collection of essays by various poets titled *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews*, develops her approach to language through a lyrical meditation on love, poetry and memory. In this essay, Michaels reveals her suspicions about language through discussing the tensions that the poet faces when forced to choose between language and silence. For Michaels, it is the inescapable failure of language to capture experience fully which leads to distrust, as, she suggests, the poet feels unease when faced with the knowledge that language cannot express what the poet desires to express. She writes:

The inevitable failure of language haunts integrity. Over the years I turn away continually, defer to the silence of experience.

We turn away from the poem; it bangs at the gate. A peculiar courtship. We like to think language is nothing without us, but in the end, it's we who beg it back. ("Cleopatra" 178)

Even when Michaels is writing about language and poetry, as she is in this essay, she writes poetically: both in her use of metaphor and in the layout of her words on the page. This passage presents an example of both. Paragraphs, if they may be called that, are as brief as one or two sentences. Sentences are often fragmented, such as “A peculiar courtship”. The language is highly metaphoric: poems bang at gates and incite courtship. I analyse these aspects of Michaels’s use of language in the following section; however, at this point in my discussion it is important to note that Michaels’s method is inseparable from her argument. Michaels uses the word “integrity” here to signal the unease that the poet experiences in his or her “peculiar courtship” with language. The poet’s relationship with language is unusual in that even when she tries to “defer” to the safety of “the silence of experience,” Michaels suggests that the relationship of desire between the poet and the poem is so strong that the poet begs it back. Language, it seems, is inescapable, despite its failures. Michaels, however, examines the failures of language metaphorically—using language to explore language. She writes that when she tries to describe an experience through language, the experience evades the description:

Language abandons experience every time. We hammer and measure, build our lines to the right length; but by the time the fence is up, the field seems empty.

A real power of words [...] is that it makes our ignorance more precise. (“Cleopatra” 178)

Michaels uses the metaphor of a fence around an empty field to depict the way in which the poet can use words to outline the experience that the poet cannot describe. Thus, the power of words, she suggests, is that they reveal our lack of knowledge. It is this paradoxical relationship, of words being used to reveal

ignorance rather than describe experience, that Michaels describes as a “futile hope”: “We carry the futile hope that by attempting to represent experience, we’ll capture what’s there, even if it’s hidden; that we’ll somehow be able to render the invisible visible, like the painter who learns the geology of a landscape before he attempts to paint it” (“Cleopatra” 180). However, even as she describes this poetic desire to render the invisible visible, Michaels suggests that it is only in circling around the invisible that the poet or writer can gesture at it; even though the gesture fails to capture the invisible, it still works as a sign of the attempt.²⁵ I refer here to the epigraph of this chapter:

Language is artificial, of course, relying on juxtaposition to represent the world, just as the artist draws the imaginary line around the apple to create the illusion of its shape, to give the illusion of its depth.

The poetic line is a boundary, a vessel; it can be made well and sing its tension.

But ultimately the poem itself is a loose net, a sieve, both unviable and durable as a physical object: a web of molecules that gives the illusion of wholeness. A net of densities. (“Cleopatra” 180-181).

Michaels’s metaphor here captures the way in which language simultaneously succeeds and fails: the poem gives the “illusion” of being a vessel that captures experience, yet it is actually a sieve, which lets experience slip through its boundaries. Michaels uses the word “illusion” three times in the above passage because it encompasses precisely the paradox of the failed success she describes. An illusion succeeds as an illusion, but it fails as a portrayal of the real. The sieve stands as a marker of the attempt of the poet to create a vessel: as a vessel, it fails to capture experience, yet, paradoxically, it is still a vessel and so, as Michaels

²⁵ The notion of failure succeeding in working as a sign of the artist’s attempt is something I explore in more detail in the work of W. G. Sebald in Chapter 4.

says is both “unviable” and “durable”. When Michaels speaks about a poem being “made well” so that it “sings its tension,” she is referring to the tension of the poem to show the boundary of that which it desires to capture, without actually capturing it. This paradox reveals the contradictions and tensions at work and therefore is an effective failure.

The distrust Michaels expresses in language finds its roots in the way language works as a repository for memory and history. Michaels discusses the way both language and memory function as malleable tools, which can be both helpful or harmful:

Language is a repository of cultural and personal memory; language remembers. We need only consider its emotive power to know that’s true: the exile who hears her mother tongue after many years, who remembers her childhood through rhymes and stories; the joy of a private vocabulary between lovers or family members.

But if language can be enriched, it can also be poisoned: if language is a repository of memory, it is also a repository of history. The simple absorption of events without ethical consideration can be devastating. The most obvious example is the euphemism: the exploding bomb referred to as ‘energy release,’ the dangerous breakdown of equipment that ‘fails to meet functioning criteria as per design requirements.’ At its most extreme, this abuse of language is perpetuated precisely in order to render the immoral, moral. As we well know, the fact is not always the truth. While metaphor uses ‘fabrication’ to get at a truth, euphemism uses fact in order to mislead. (“Cleopatra” 181-182)

In this passage Michaels explores the capacity of language to absorb both memory and history. Language can be deliberately abused, and it is the memory of this “abuse” that then is “absorb[ed]” into the language like a “poison”.

Michaels thus reveals the potential devastation of the misuse of language through the examples she provides in this passage. However, she also shows the

productive potential of metaphor, which also makes use of language's malleability and memory as a way to gesture at truths. Metaphor, however, signals the impossibility of securing the truth even as it gestures to it.

Michaels identifies the euphemism as an example of the way history shields itself with language, or hides itself within a discourse of fact. The two examples of euphemisms she provides here have no immediate reference to the Holocaust. However, this understanding of the distortion of language is echoed in *Fugitive Pieces* by Michaels's protagonist, Jakob Beer. As a survivor of the Holocaust, Jakob displays first hand understanding of the poisoning of language. It is only when this passage from "Cleopatra's Love" is read in conversation with the one that echoes it in *Fugitive Pieces*, that Michaels's references to euphemisms register the Nazis' use of "stücke" and "figuren". Jakob writes specifically about the Nazis' deliberate abuse of language in their attempts to rationalize genocide:

Nazi policy was beyond racism, it was anti-matter, for Jews were not considered human. An old trick of language, used often in the course of history. Non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as 'figuren,' 'stücke' — 'dolls,' 'wood,' 'merchandise,' 'rags.' Humans were not being gassed, only 'figuren,' so ethics weren't being violated. No one could be faulted for burning debris, for burning rags and clutter in the dirty basement of society.
(*Fugitive Pieces* 165)

This passage reveals how Nazi propaganda harnessed and abused language in order to rationalize immorality. What is interesting, though, is that Jakob shows how the Nazis used both euphemism and dysphemism—shifting between their desire to cover up the unpleasant and embarrassing nature of genocide and using hate speech to incite further nationalism. In his notebooks, Jakob writes that, "[w]hile the German language annihilated metaphor, turning humans into

objects, physicists turned matter into energy. The step from language/formula to fact: denotation to detonation" (*Fugitive Pieces* 143). In considering the shift of meaning created by moving three letters in a word, Jakob highlights the way in which language, which seems neutral on its own, depending on its use, can have dangerous connotative power. "The history of an incorrect term can also prove instructive," writes Giorgio Agamben in his chapter "The Witness" in *The Witness and the Archive*. Agamben discusses the history of the misuse of the term "Holocaust" and then considers a similar misuse of the term "Shoah," which functions as a form of euphemism that he finds "intolerable" (Agamben 31). Agamben provides a discussion of the religious connotations of the word and relates this to the notion often expressed in survivor literature that Auschwitz is "unsayable" (32). This idea of the unsayable is, he argues, equally intolerable:

Euphemein, which originally means 'to observe religious silence,' is the origin of the modern word 'euphemism,' which denotes those terms that are substituted for other terms that cannot be uttered for reasons of modesty or civility. To say that Auschwitz is 'unsayable' or 'incomprehensible' is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence, as one does with a god. Regardless of one's intentions, this contributes to its glory. We, however, 'are not ashamed of staring into the unsayable'—even at the risk of discovering what evil knows of itself, we can also easily find in ourselves. (Agamben 32-33)

The idea of "contributing" to the glory of the "unsayable" is not an option for the witness, according to Agamben. Rather, he considers how the witness must learn to listen to a "non-language or a dark and maimed language" in order to begin to bear witness to that which some have said is "unsayable" (Agamben 37).²⁶

²⁶ Agamben's notion of a "dark and maimed language" is taken from Primo Levi's reading of Celan's poetry, together with his description of Hurbinek, the "nobody, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz" who only speaks in unintelligible words and sounds (Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 1986: 191).

In her earlier poems, Michaels explores how after Auschwitz, the memory of perpetration absorbed into the German language is something that is translatable. The depth of connotation in certain words remains even when the word is translated from the language of the perpetrators into another. Michaels portrays this negative memory of language in poem titled “What the Light Teaches”:

Language remembers.
Out of obscurity, a word takes its place
in history. Even a word so simple
it’s translatable: number. Oven. (*Weight/Miner’s* 113)

Seemingly innocuous concrete nouns such as these, “number” and “oven,” are, after Auschwitz, signifiers loaded with terrifying historical significance. In them, the history of trauma and unthinkable acts of perpetration now reside regardless of which language they are uttered or written in. As a result, language becomes ruined by memory. However, these lines are also an example of the productive use of juxtaposition: these two words convey more connotations when they are placed next to one another. On their own, the words “number” or “oven” carry a degree of Holocaust connotation, but when placed side by side, they invoke further depths of traumatic memory.

Michaels’s attentiveness of the ruined state of the German language invites a discussion about the work of the post-Holocaust poet Paul Celan. Celan spoke openly of his relationship to the German language as a German speaking Jewish poet. Celan’s biographer, John Felstiner, writes that Celan became “an exemplary postwar poet because he insistently registered in German the catastrophe made in Germany” (Felstiner xvii). As a result, Felstiner suggests:

Celan's lyrics, being in German, pose a particular challenge. For the 'Thousand-Year Reich' organized its genocide of European Jewry by means of language: slogans, slurs, pseudo-scientific dogma, propaganda, euphemism, and the jargon that brought about every devastating 'action,' from the earliest racial 'laws' through 'special treatment' in the camps to the last 'resettlement' of Jewish orphans. (xvii)

Felstiner's comments highlight the intentional abuse of language as an integral part of the Nazi mission. Thus, while Celan chose to continue writing poetry in German after the Holocaust, he did recognize that the German language now carried the memory of the Holocaust within it. Celan speaks of his relationship with the German language in his famous Bremen address:

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all. (*Collected Prose* 34)

Felstiner writes that Celan uses the quotations on the word "enriched" here to emphasise the irony he is placing on the word, as the German language has been anything but "enriched" by catastrophe (Felstiner 115).²⁷ Celan best explains this traumatic history registered in the German language in his letter of reply to a questionnaire from the Flinker Bookstore. He writes that:

No matter how alive its [German poetry's] traditions, with most sinister events in its memory, most questionable developments around it, it can no longer speak the language which many willing ears seem to expect. Its language has become more sober, more factual. It distrusts 'beauty'. It tries to be truthful [...] it is a 'greyer'

²⁷ Interestingly, "enriched" is the very same word that Michaels uses when she suggests that "if language can be enriched, it can also be poisoned: if language is a repository of memory, it is also a repository of history" ("Cleopatra's Love" 182). Could it be that Michaels is gesturing to Celan when she writes these words?

language, a language which wants to locate even its 'musicality' in such a way that it has nothing in common with the 'euphony' which more or less blithely continued to sound alongside the greatest horrors. (*Collected Prose* 16)

It is Celan's efforts to speak and write in German while registering the "most sinister events in its memory" that has caused his poetry and his use of the German language to become integral to discussions of aesthetics after the Holocaust. Discussions of Adorno's dictum thus often include references to Celan's aesthetic project.²⁸ Felstiner describes Celan's use of German as a form of wrestling; he refers to what Celan termed "the fateful uniqueness of [the German] language," a fatefulness that, as Felstiner explains, "led Celan to strain, admix, invade, and undo that same language. His writing [...] reveals a Jakob's struggle with the German lexicon. Jakob wrestled with the angel until he obtained a blessing and a name, but in the struggle he 'was strained'" (Felstiner 170-171). It is quite possible that such references to Celan's aesthetic project caused Bentley to suggest that Michaels's protagonist, Jakob Beer, "may well be modelled, at least in part, on such poets as Paul Celan" (2). However, aside from using the most quoted part of Celan's Bremen address (quoted above) as one of his epilogues (together with Adorno's dictum as the other), Bentley makes no further mention of Celan or his poetics in the rest of his paper. To my knowledge, the only other critics to make reference to Celan in their discussion of *Fugitive Pieces* are Donna Coffey and Rachel Falconer: both only provide a connection between the reference to a musical fugue in the novel's title and its possible reference to Celan's most famous poem, "Death Fugue" (Coffey 63; Falconer 109). Neither of these critics, however, analyses this echo any further than a very

²⁸ Bentley, for example, uses Adorno's dictum and Celan's Bremen address as the epigraphs for his paper on *Fugitive Pieces*.

brief mention. This is surprising, when one considers the references to the Biblical figure of Jacob in Celan's poetry and its depiction of Celan's wrestle with language.²⁹

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, Jakob Beer's own poetic wrestles follow those of Celan's; he describes his own struggle to register catastrophe in language in his notebooks. Jakob's fragmented poetics, however, do contain some significant differences to those of Celan's. The most obvious difference being that, in his poetry, Jakob abandons his mother tongues (both Yiddish and Polish) and chooses to write in English as he believes it to be "an alphabet without memory" (*Fugitive Pieces* 101). Thus, while Celan is known for straining to find ways to write in a German steeped in what Michaels would call "poisoned memory," Jakob chooses to "write down the events [...] in a language foreign to their happening" (*Fugitive Pieces* 101). While this may seem a glaring difference between the two, I would like to argue that the essence of Celan and Jakob's poetic engagements with language still contains similarities with regard to their pursuit of a fragmented language with which to portray catastrophe. Furthermore, when we consider how Michaels's poetry suggests that the history of the Holocaust is translatable, we inevitably reconsider Jakob's suggestion that English is "an alphabet without memory." Even in English, therefore, Jakob cannot avoid the memory of the Holocaust and must still wrestle, like his namesake, with language. In the passage below, Jakob describes his struggles between silence and language. He describes the affinity he feels to the great black silhouettes created by large factories against the Toronto night skyline. These

²⁹ Celan's early poem, "Russian Spring" speaks about wrestling with "Ya'akov's angel". Felstiner provides a detailed discussion of this poem and the significance of the Biblical motif in Celan's work.

looming black spaces remind Jakob of the absence and silence at the core of his personal trauma:

I listened to these dark shapes as if they were black spaces in music, a musician learning the silences of a piece. I felt this was my truth. That my life could not be stored in any language but only in silence [...] But I did not know how to seek by way of silence. So I lived a breath apart, a touch-typist who holds his hands above the keys slightly in the wrong place, the words coming out meaningless, garbled [...] I thought of writing poems this way, in code, every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language.

If one could isolate that space, that damaged chromosome in words, in an image, then perhaps one could restore order by naming. (*Fugitive Pieces* 111)³⁰

However, although he recognizes that ultimately it is absence which he wishes to respond to, Jakob admits that he does not know how to register this in language, nor how to keep silent. He resorts to writing poetry, in the spirit of Paul Celan, in wrecked and fragmented language. Jakob's attempts to articulate catastrophe therefore find a way in which to maintain the tension between language and silence. Bruss suggests that this fragmentation is an element of Jakob's discourse development: "one strain of writing in Jakob's memoir is associated with recording his catastrophe, a language of fragments – grammatical fragments and clauses without strong cohesion" (29). For example, Bruss points to the fragmented discourse in which Jakob describes the trauma of his home being invaded by Nazis:

The burst door. Wood ripped from hinges, cracking like ice under the shouts. Noises never heard before, torn from my father's mouth. Then silence. My mother had been sewing a button on my shirt. She kept her buttons in a chipped saucer. I heard the rim of

³⁰ See Whitehead for a discussion on the influence of Kabbalism on Michaels's restorative approach to language.

the saucer in circles on the floor. I heard the spray of buttons, little white teeth. (Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* 7)

The abrupt nature of the short, fragmented sentences in this passage speaks of the traumatic nature of the event, while the language used also speaks of rupture: “burst”, “ripped”, “crackling”, “torn”. Jakob’s wrecked and fragmented language is able to reveal the inadequacies of language while using it in a productive relationship with silence.

I return here to Adorno’s method in order to consider the similarities between it and Michaels’s portrayal of Jakob’s poetics. Adorno finds ways to wreck the language he uses by continually registering “unresolved tension,” within his use of language (Weber 14). As Weber remarks, this tension “lives from and bears witness to the impossibility of a harmonious union of form and content, language and meaning, an idea which survives in his work precisely in and through its determinate negation” (14). Just as Celan wrestled with the German language—with his knowledge of its complicity—so, too, does Adorno find ways to force the German language to reveal its limits.

Similarly, in “Cleopatra’s Love”, Michaels explores the paradox that language has to fail in order for it to succeed. She proposes that the only way the poet or writer can begin to trust language enough to use it is to have a deep-seated distrust of language. However, not only must the poet or writer have a well defined distrust of language (that arises from the knowledge of the ways in which language can be distorted and can carry the memory of abuse in its connotations) but also, as Michaels demonstrates, the writer must continually find ways to *signal* their distrust of language in order to use it. Michaels models this throughout the essay by continually registering her own mistrust of

language through phrases such as the following: "Whenever I attempt to utter the experience, words turn it to dross; language is broken, bulky, dissolute. Fraudulent, inaccurate. Drunken. Too reverential, too referential. Lusterless or too lustrous" ("Cleopatra" 178). She repeats these sentiments in another essay, "Unseen Formations," where she examines the "dross" of words: "Language casts a wide net; you capture something only by pulling up a lot of dross with it; the shell still entangled with seaweed" ("Unseen" 98). Michaels's metaphor here expresses the opposite image to that of a sieve, which let through the experience it was meant to capture. However, despite their disparity, both of these metaphors speak of the inadequacies of language. In the same essay, Michaels also speaks of the tension between the writer's knowledge of the failure of language and their desire to use language. "A real power of words," Michaels writes, in the exact words she uses in "Cleopatra's Love," "is that they make our ignorance more precise. Writing is negative aspiration: to work strenuously towards the moment when failure is confirmed. [...] Writing is a desperate act, in the sense that one always knows it will end in failure. What's on the page is only an entry point for what's still buried in ourselves. A shred, a shadow" ("Unseen" 97). Thus, through continually acknowledging the "desperate" "negative aspiration" of the writer, Michaels displays the self-reflexivity necessary for those writing in the wake of the Holocaust.³¹

In both "Cleopatra's Love" and "Unseen Formations," Michaels explores the ways in which metaphor holds two seemingly opposing elements in productive tension. She writes: "The metaphor is the mechanism that creates the mirage. It

³¹ The suggestion of "negative aspiration" recalls Adorno's hope that matching a negative with another negative will "release an image of what else might be possible" (Thomson 30).

joins disparity; electric as a filament. It's almost as if, by augmenting language's limitations, we make it work: the mathematical computation in which two errors cancel each other to produce the correct result" ("Cleopatra" 179). The similarities with Adorno's negative dialectical style are obvious here. Metaphor, for Michaels, is intimately connected with the way in which language's failure can become its success. By way of example, Michaels examines how Rodin's sculptures created the illusion of movement through holding opposing positions in tension. "This reminds me of Rodin's realization," she writes, "if he presented heads, limbs, and torso in their true positions at any given instant of a single step, the figure appeared—ironically—static" ("Cleopatra" 179). However, Michaels explains, that if Rodin "presented each body part at a separate instant of a single step," which would seemingly be less 'truthful' to what he saw, that, "he could create a sense of movement, [which] revealed time, rather than arrested it" ("Cleopatra" 179). Rodin's work therefore becomes a metaphor for metaphor, Michaels argues, as the simultaneous presentation of two or more disparate elements cancel each other out and present a truth: a "singing surface" ("Unseen" 96).

Memory, Michaels suggests, functions in a similar way to metaphor. The point of commonality between the two is their employment of juxtaposition. Speaking still of Rodin's example as a way to understand metaphor's mechanisms, Michaels argues that, "fictive juxtapositions often seem closer to the truth" ("Cleopatra" 179). I gave an example of the productivity of juxtaposition earlier in Michaels's use of the words "number" and "oven," placed side by side in her poem "What the Light Teaches". As single words, these nouns carry certain connotations, yet, when they are juxtaposed, their effectiveness is

significantly increased. This is because the effect of their juxtaposition allows a glimpse of the traumatic memory embedded in each word's meaning. If the word "number," for example, were juxtaposed with a different noun that did not carry Holocaust connotations, such as "chalkboard," arguably the effect and connotations evoked could be significantly different. Michaels therefore writes that: "[m]emory, like metaphor, is heightened by relation" ("Cleopatra" 179). However, when she uses the term "relation," Michaels is not only speaking about juxtaposition and metaphors, but she also includes the notion of the relation between words and silence, often signalled by the spaces between words on the page or their layout. Words and their relation to silence work in a similar way to the relationship between notes in music. When asked how she maintains the tension between narrative and lyricism in a long poem, Michaels answers that tension is maintained by "relation":

The narrator, for me, has to work in a very particular way. One analogy is to the way people talk about the space between notes in music, which doesn't exist; there's no such thing as space between notes, *but there is a relationship between notes*. So it is in the narrative as well. Much as the skeleton is in the body yet you don't see it, but it holds the body up, yet you do see it at various points where the bones jut out and you're made aware that there's something there. Such metaphors are of help, because I'm so interested in history and fascinated by the gaps between events, the silences. [...] To me, the narrative in a sense is all about the relationship of parts which make a bigger whole. What's in between tells a story somehow. ("Narrative Moves" 238; emphasis mine)

It is the relationship between notes, between words, between parts, which tells a crucial part of the story. Michaels's aesthetic of fragments is, I argue, grounded in this principle.

5. An Aesthetic of Fragmentation

While many critics have commented on the fragmentation in *Fugitive Pieces*, most of them have not considered how Michaels's use of fragmentation is productive in the way it provokes engagement on the part of the reader. The fragmented nature of language in both the structure and thematic concerns of *Fugitive Pieces*, however, has been given significant attention. The idea of fragments is alluded to in the word "pieces" in the title of the novel, and the very layout of the text is also fragmented on a number of levels. The novel is in sections, but each section is broken down into further segments of varied length, some with a "f" section marker between them, others with just wide paragraph breaks on the page. Furthermore, within these sections and paragraphs (all unnumbered and only the larger chapters titled), Michaels's sentences are often fragmented: the prose is "set out like poems in short, widely spaced paragraphs" (Falconer 93) and contains "grammatical fragments and clauses without strong cohesion" (Bruss 29). Falconer argues that "Michaels's fragmented prose [...] gestures to the silences behind her broken and 'fugitive' words," which she reads as a way the novel "avoid[s] the traditional forms of narrative closure that might be said to seal over past trauma" (Falconer 93). I would like to suggest, however, that Michaels's use of fragmentation does more than simply gesture at silence: it creates a productive tension both between the different fragments and also between the fragments and the silences which seem to separate them. The effectiveness of the relation between fragments lies in the way they create productive juxtaposition. Cook's argument is similar to that of Falconer's. She suggests that the figurative language of *Fugitive Pieces* gestures towards textual depth which requires a different approach to reading. "Michaels's fascination

with the metaphoric potential of memory – or metaphor as mnemonic device –,” Cook writes, “bespeaks a preoccupation with textual depth that is pervasive in *Fugitive Pieces*. Like memory, the metaphor gestures toward the unseen, the invisible, to what is not available upon the surface of the text or within a superficial reading but which may be discerned upon careful excavation” (26). For Cook, this characterizes *Fugitive Pieces* as a poet’s novel: “This ‘depth’ reading, this insistence on a truth that is behind or beneath the image rather than the more conventional method of reading for plot and narrative is symptomatic of a text occupying the hybrid status of ‘poetic’ novel” (26). Cook’s point that the metaphoric prose of *Fugitive Pieces* requires a depth of reading which gestures towards what is unsaid, reveals the way in which Michaels’s use of poetic language engages the reader. However, Cook expresses unease about how Michaels’s “lush, poetic discourse jars uneasily with the horrors she is narrating” (Cook 16). I would like to suggest that it is precisely because Michaels’s fragmented poetic prose does, as Cook says, “contribute to our discomfort as readers” (Cook 16), that it can be considered to be “productively barbaric”. The space of discomfort is precisely what Adorno was calling for, and demonstrating stylistically in his essay, as I discussed earlier in this chapter.

Michaels’s use of fragmentation in *Fugitive Pieces* is, I argue, based on her understanding of the productivity of juxtaposition. In an interview, Michaels describes *Fugitive Pieces* as “a narrative of relation,” in which “the language [...] is precise [...] consist[ing] of discrete sections, which work by virtue of their juxtaposition but also taking into account the gap, the silence between lines, as part of the storytelling” (“Narrative Moves” 240). Michaels is acutely aware of the way in which a narrative is formed through the relationship between parts

and how the spaces between parts are integral to the formation of this relationship. The spaces between the fragments of text work as the silences of the text and allude to the elisions and gaps of memory. Michaels's use of fragmentation therefore speaks to the tension between the conflicting imperatives to narrate the horrors of the Holocaust and to remain silent. These silences hold the sections together, while simultaneously creating the fragmentary feel of the work. Michaels says that she is very aware of how the work looks on the page: that she has trained herself to "obey the visual objectivity of the typewriter and the sheet of paper," so that she can see the separateness of the words and the gaps on the page between them ("Narrative Moves" 240). The gaps between the fragments of text in *Fugitive Pieces*, therefore, must be read as playing an integral part in creating instances of juxtaposition.

Furthermore, the gaps and silences in the novel *between* the fragments point towards the workings of memory. Michaels says that memory works in fragments and, therefore, the fragmentation in *Fugitive Pieces*, "has to do with the fact that it's a first person narrative, it's someone remembering, two men remembering, and memory works that way, in a fragmented way" (Michaels "Strand"). Fragmentation also works in a similar way to metaphor, in that through creating productive juxtapositions, it creates space for the reader to read into those gaps and spaces. In "Cleopatra's Love," Michaels writes that "[m]emory, like metaphor, is heightened by relation. The metaphor unifies separate components into a complex whole, creating something greater than a sum of parts" ("Cleopatra" 179). Just as the connotative power of the words "number" and "oven" is increased through their juxtaposition, so too are the

fragments of memory *presented collectively* in Michaels's text even more evocative. Michaels explains that there is "an intensity in [...] fragmentation [that] allows a place for the reader in the book. [...] It makes a place for the reader in the book to come to the book to think about the questions that are arising, to think and to feel at the same time," because, Michaels says, "we [cannot] get at an abstraction [...] without thought or feeling being absolutely, inextricably entwined" ("Strand").

Thus Michaels's use of fragmentation works in a similar way to Adorno's dialectical style, which aims to force its reader into productive engagement through confronting them with irreconcilable contradictions held together in tension. Similarly, like Adorno, Michaels's aesthetic of fragmentation is focused on revealing the effective failures of language. Through her use of fragmented language held in tension with gaps and silences, Michaels continually reminds herself and her reader of the tensions between the inadequacy of language to convey experience and the necessity that language be called upon to convey experience. Michaels's aesthetic of fragmentation works in a similar way to Adorno's dialectical style, which juxtaposes a negative with another negative in the hope of releasing an impression—and illusion—of what else might be possible. The fragmentation in the layout and language of *Fugitive Pieces*, therefore, is, to use Adorno's phrase, productively "barbaric" in that it simultaneously uses and undermines its use of language: just as the poetic line can be made well and "sing its tension" while remaining an artificial or illusory boundary.

These first two chapters have set up some of the nodes of enquiry which I continue to employ in the rest of this thesis. In the following chapter, I reflect on

how W. G. Sebald's use of photography creates layered instances of visual address which activate a sense of responsibility in the viewer. I therefore extend the lines of discussion I began in Chapter 1 concerning the effect of instances of textual address. However, the following chapter also considers some of the preoccupations of this chapter, as I explore how Sebald's use of photography might be considered "productively barbaric."

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Chapter 3:
“A Dubious Business”: Fact, Fiction and Photography in W. G. Sebald’s
Austerlitz and *The Emigrants*



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1. Introduction

On his initial visit to Austerlitz’s house, one of the first things the narrator sees and describes is a table in the front room on which there are many photographs, some of which, he remarks, were already familiar to him although he has never seen them before. He describes the scene as follows:

Apart from what seemed to me a curiously elongated old-fashioned ottoman, the front room, into which Austerlitz took me first, had nothing in it but a large table, also varnished matt grey, with several dozen photographs lying on it, most of them dating quite a long way back and rather worn at the edges. *Some of the pictures were already familiar to me, so to speak:* pictures of empty Belgian landscapes, stations and métro viaducts in Paris, the palm

³² This photograph appears on the cover of *Austerlitz* and is repeated inside the text on page 258.

house in the Jardin des Plantes, various moths and other night-flying insects, ornate dovecotes, Gerald Fitzpatrick on the airfield near Quay, and a number of heavy doors and gateways. (Sebal, *Austerlitz* 167; emphasis mine)

I have emphasized the phrase about the familiarity of the photographs in the above passage as it suggests that the narrator has seen these images before.

However, the narrator's use of the phrase "so to speak" modifies his claim of familiarity for, although he has not yet actually seen any of these photographs, they are still in some sense "familiar" as their images have already played an integral part in Austerlitz's narrative. Many of the photographs described here by the narrator are also "already familiar" to the reader: at this point in the text there have been some 37 images or photographs embedded within the narrative. On reading this passage, the reader will recognize the narrator's verbal descriptions of photographs that they have already viewed: stations and viaducts, Gerald Fitzpatrick on the airfield at Quay and a photograph of a moth, among other things (*Austerlitz* 11; 164; 118 and 133). This brief passage therefore creates the terms by which the reader is placed in a similar position to the narrator: the reader is addressed by the photographs and is positioned as their next inheritor.

As objects embedded in the text, Sebald's photographs cause the act of passing on to be more tangible. The description of Austerlitz's photographic table foreshadows the narrator's inheritance of these photographs from Austerlitz, as well as the reader's subsequent inheritance of them through their textual reproduction. Austerlitz bequeaths these photographs to the narrator during their last visit, when he gives him the key to his house and suggests that the narrator, "could stay there whenever [he] liked, [...] and study the black and

white photographs which, one day, would be all that was left of [Austerlitz's] life" (*Austerlitz* 408). Not only does Austerlitz consider these photographs to be his main legacy (and the means by which his narrative is memorialized), but also, at this final stage of the novel, the reader is led to understand that many of the photographs they have viewed within the text are reproductions of photographs from this table. Thus *Austerlitz* models the passing on of photographs both within the narrative of the text (between Austerlitz and the narrator) as well as through the layout of the text (by reproducing the photographs). A similar narrative construction is at work in *The Emigrants*, as the narrator inherits various photographs, diaries and family albums from different characters. The actual reprinting of the photographs within the text, therefore, invites the reader into this process of remembering.

In this chapter I analyse how Sebald's inclusion of photographs within his texts—which has become a hallmark of his oeuvre—works as an instance of visual address and as a form of structural postmemory which is both destabilizing and productive. By "structural postmemory" I mean that Sebald's texts are structured so as to position the reader as an inheritor of the memories transmitted within the text. I begin by examining how the reproduction of the photographs in Sebald's texts create layers of address and positions the reader as an inheritor of the photographs. However, I argue that Sebald calls the nature of photographs into question, by placing forged photographs and images of performance within his texts, at the same time that he uses photographs effectively. I examine how this has provoked discomfort in Sebald's interviewers and critics and how it has resulted in a misunderstanding of how postmemory works in Sebald's texts. In the course of this discussion I draw attention to some

of the points of connection between Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and Sebald's use of photographs. Barthes's famous work on the nature of photography is also a meditation on the memory of his mother, and therefore it is a work which has poignant significance for an exploration of Sebald's use of photographs and "the weight of memory". Both Whitehead and Hirsch make reference to Barthes in their examination of Sebald's photographs; however, neither of them has paid careful attention to the similarities between Barthes and Sebald's descriptions of photographs and the way in which Sebald's use of photographs problematizes some of Barthes's assertions. In this chapter I argue that Sebald reveals our expectation of photographs as instances of documentary evidence in order to provoke us to more careful engagement with photographs and texts.

2. Visual Address

The reproduction of photographs in Sebald's texts function as a form of visual address, in which the viewer is addressed by the gaze of the face in the photograph. Photographs work as forms of visual address on multiple levels in *Austerlitz*: they address characters within the world of the text as well as the reader outside of the text. For example, Austerlitz confesses to feeling an address on viewing the photograph of himself as a page boy (reproduced as the epigraph for this chapter). He tells the narrator: "I have studied the photograph many times. [...] And in doing so I always felt the piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting in the grey light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of him" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 259-260). Austerlitz thus explains how the

direct gaze of this photograph evokes a sense of responsibility within him: he speaks of the boy “com[ing] to demand his dues” and issuing a “challenge” to him. This photograph thus portrays a very clear instance of feeling the address of the other. Anne Whitehead has read this as an example of the way Sebald’s texts extend “the Freudian uncanny into new territory,” as the photograph lead “Austerlitz [to feel] that he himself has no place in reality, but is ‘unreal in the eyes of the dead’ (*Austerlitz* 261)” inventing a ‘disturbing, inverted new take on ghosts, for whom we are the unreal people’ (Annan, 2001: 27)” (Whitehead 130-131). Whitehead reads the uncanny as linked to the Holocaust for Sebald, in which the, “dead who are ever returning to us are those who were exterminated in the concentration camps and who cannot be properly laid to rest. Their photographs in family albums assume a haunting and spectral presence, so that the familiar (familial) is rendered unfamiliar and disturbing” (Whitehead 131). Reading these instances as evidence of the uncanny serves to highlight their “disturbing” effect, which not only disturbs the characters *within* Sebald’s texts, but also escapes the confines of the text so as to disturb the reader as well.

Positioning the photograph of the page boy on the cover of the text engages the reader even before Austerlitz’s story begins as the reproduction of this photograph, further emphasized by its repetition in the text (it appears on the cover as well as within the text on page 258), addresses the reader.

Furthermore, the levels of address and response enacted within the text create a lineage of witnesses which includes the reader. The sense of responsibility evoked by this photograph provokes Austerlitz to tell his story (which is also the page boy’s story) to the narrator and give him the photograph. Austerlitz therefore responds to the photograph by witnessing and passing on to the

narrator, who, in turn, responds to Austerlitz and the page boy by retelling their stories within the space of the text and passing them on to the reader.

However, this photograph presents an interesting twist of the usual visual relations that occur between the photographed “dead” and those who view the photograph as, in this instance, Austerlitz is viewing a photograph of his former self. “In *Camera Lucida*,” writes Whitehead, “Roland Barthes famously argued that the essence of every photograph, the terrible thing of which it consists, is the return of the dead” (Whitehead 130). Austerlitz is therefore being addressed by himself in a web of complex relations in which the self that issues a challenge is the self of his former life: a self that he has no memory of and cannot incorporate. He speaks of this former self as a ghostly twin that accompanies him as he grows up in Wales: “I felt as if an invisible twin brother were walking beside me, the reverse of a shadow, so to speak” (*Austerlitz* 76). Sebald’s depiction of Austerlitz viewing his former self extends Roland Barthes’s suggestion that the photograph speaks of the death of those photographed: “I am the reference of every photograph, and this is what generates my astonishment in addressing myself to the fundamental question: why is it that I am alive *here and now*?” (Barthes 84). This is precisely what Austerlitz asks himself when he views a photograph of his former “dead” self. It is as if his past life has come back to haunt him and question his presence.

Similarly, the viewing relations are reversed in the companion photograph to this one: the other family photograph of two actors on a stage, which Austerlitz receives from his nursemaid, Věra. When she looks at this photograph, Věra speaks of the address of old photographs as if there were almost audible small sighs or groans emanating from them: “One has the

impression, she said, of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair, [...] said Austerlitz, as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives" (*Austerlitz* 258). The inversion here suggests that the photographs are remembering us and viewing us, which has a vertiginous effect on the viewer. It stages a face-to-face encounter in which both agents view each other with equal force.

Sebald's scene in which Austerlitz views the photograph of himself as a page boy follows Barthes's description of himself viewing a photograph of himself in *Camera Lucida*. Consider the following description Barthes's provides:

One day I received from a photographer a picture of myself which I could not remember being taken, for all my efforts; I inspected the tie, the sweater, to discover in what circumstances I had worn then; to no avail. And yet, *because it was a photograph* I could not deny that I had been *there* (even if I did not know *where*). This distortion between certainty and oblivion gave me a kind of vertigo, something of a 'detective' anguish [...]; I went to the photographer's show as to a police investigation, to learn at last what I no longer knew myself. (Barthes 85)

The description here echoes the scene of Austerlitz viewing a photograph of himself that he has no memory of:

The picture lay before me, said Austerlitz, but I dared not touch it [...] Yet hard as I tried both that evening and later, I could not recollect myself in the part. I did recognize the unusual hairline running at a slant over the forehead, but otherwise all memory was extinguished in me by an overwhelming sense of the long years that had passed. (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 259)

Thus, this photograph presents a memory that Austerlitz cannot connect with.

Věra confirms that this is indeed a photograph of Austerlitz: "the small boy [...] is you, Jacquot, in February 1939, about six months before you left Prague. [...] On

the back it says *Jacquot Austerlitz, páže růžové královny*, in your grandfather's handwriting, for he happened to be visiting at the time" (*Austerlitz* 258-259). The insistence on the date functions as a means to authenticate the photograph, and yet at the same time it problematizes Barthes's argument that "the Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*" (85). The photograph functions as documentary evidence, but as fictional documentary-evidence and therefore as a paradox.

J. J. Long has identified that some of the photographs in *The Emigrants* are included within the space of the text specifically for the reader and they therefore address the reader ("History" 132). These photographs work in two distinct ways: those which are "clearly referential and illustrate the verbal text" and those that "exist in a radically indeterminate relationship to the words around them" ("History" 132). The illustrative photographs provide documentary evidence of the narrator's life (photographs of Selwyn's empty gardens, drawings of his childhood classroom, snapshots from his visits to Deauville and Bad Kissingen, to name a few).³³ For Long, the referentiality of these photographs is clear: "[they] invite a primarily indexical reading [...] and] serve an authenticating function [...] anchoring the autobiographical tendency of the discourse. Such a reading would view the photographs as more or less unmediated fragments of the real, whose role is merely to document contingency" ("History" 132). The other group of photographs, such as the first photograph of a large tree in a graveyard, provides no such stable referentiality; Long argues that they are thus potentially "disorientating for the reader," as their

³³ These photographs can be found on the following pages of *The Emigrants*: 6,7, 33, 117,118, 119, 221, 222, 223, 226 and 229.

relation to the text is ambiguous ("History" 133). However, he suggests that these photographs are only disorientating if "we assume that the photographs in question have to be read in terms of their reference to a reality that is prior and external to the text" (Long, "History" 133). Rather, Long suggests that if these photographs are read in light of Sebald's view of history, which is, he suggests, "characterized by a negative teleology," then these photographs reveal Sebald's "desire to find something stable and constant in the face of such historical pessimism" ("History" 137). He therefore suggests we read these potentially disorientating photographs symbolically, as "images that refer to other images within the same text," therefore creating "a complex set of pictorial interrelations" that address "the overall thematic issues that permeate the verbal narrative" ("History" 133-134). This kind of reading, which involves reflexive reference, "create[s] patterns of constancy that are repeated within and between the lives of the individual emigrants, including the narrator himself" (Long, "History" 135). Rather than destabilizing the text, therefore, Long argues these photographs create stability and constancy.

However, I would like to linger a bit longer on the photographs' potentially destabilizing effects and what that might mean for the ethical imperatives of Sebald's texts. As I discuss in section 4 in this chapter, Sebald purposefully questions his use of photographs in such a way as to reveal the very instability of the media. I find it hard, therefore, to read the photographs which address the reader as instances of textual stability as Long suggests. The photographs that address the reader are placed in the text by the narrator and are not photographs that are passed on within the world of the text by other characters. Many of them do seem to be lacking in reference, but this lack of

reference might provoke the reader into a more careful engagement with the photograph. I would like to consider what the ethical effect might be of these visual instances of address, as Sebald, like Anne Michaels, seems to pursue continual destabilizing within his works. I would argue that he sees destabilization as productive in that it invites the reader to create meaning, even in the midst of that very meaning being continually called into question.

3. Fact or Fiction?

Sebald's use of photographs has provoked a myriad of questions that attempt to distinguish between what is fact in his work and what is fiction. This is not surprising, considering the ways in which Sebald inscribes himself into the character of his narrator, the inclusion of numerous photographs in all of his texts and the historical content of his works. It is Sebald's use of photographs, specifically, which highlights his position regarding desires to demarcate fact from fiction: for Sebald, fact and fiction are "not alternatives" (Sebald in Bigsby "In Conversation" 153). The obsessive desire to categorize Sebald's texts into factual and fictional parts is seen in Sebald's interviewers and in his literary critics.³⁴ Ostensibly, the concern to differentiate between fact and fiction has increased since the outcry over works such as Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948*, which claimed to be personal testimony but was revealed to be total fabrication.³⁵ "Fragments," writes Anne Whitehead,

³⁴ Interestingly, most of the critics and interviewers who pose questions such as these focus on Sebald's work, *The Emigrants*. See Wachtel, Angier, Cuomo, Franklin, Lubow, Elcott, Ceuppens, Blacker, and Anderson.

³⁵ Anne Whitehead provides a useful discussion of *Fragments* in the second chapter of *Trauma Fiction*. She notes that when it was revealed that the text was not, in fact, a memoir, and that

collapsed the boundary between fact and fiction in an unprecedented manner and critics were at a loss as to how to categorise the text. Although it was published as a memoir, this description was clearly no longer appropriate because memoir, by definition, describes experiences that the author has lived through. [...] In deliberately framing his text as a memoir, Wilkomirski breaks with what Lejeune has termed the 'autobiographical pact', whereby a text can be classed as autobiography if the author and the narrator-protagonist coincide. (31-32)

Sebald's work presents a similar collapse between the boundaries of fact and fiction; however, unlike Wilkomirski, Sebald's texts make no explicit claims to memoir, but rather play with boundaries between memoir and fiction through hinting at their fictionality and their facticity. The intentional lack of any "autobiographical pact," to use Lejeune's phrase that Whitehead employs in the passage above, thus potentially destabilizes the reader. While Sebald's interviewers' responses to his texts, which I examine in this section, demonstrate this instability, Sebald himself, however, states that he sees this destabilizing in his work as "viable," thus highlighting his purposeful creation of productive tension within his texts (Sebald in Angier 75).

Sebald's responses to questions in his interviews are consistent with his portrayal in his fiction: fact and fiction are not easily separable. In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, Sebald explains his position: "Fact and fiction [...] are not alternatives. They are both hybrids with the constituent parts in different measure" (Bigsby "In Conversation" 153). Mark Anderson suggests that for Sebald, "our most personal and vivid memories are often false [...]" historiography rests on faulty sources, and therefore [...] photographs are

Wilkomirski was in fact Bruno Grosjean, that publishers withdrew the book from print, later republishing it as *Fragments* (without the subtitle *Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948*) and prefaced by Stefan Maechler's report on the surrounding controversy" (Whitehead 31; 165).

comprised of a similarly 'irritating' mix of truth and falsification" ("Documents" 147). Long has proposed, therefore, that those who try to separate fact from fiction in Sebald's texts miss the point. "The blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction is germane to Sebald's texts," he writes, "and any attempt to redraw the boundaries that the author systematically effaces may well impoverish rather than enrich our understanding of his work" (Long, "History" 117-118). Long suggests that Sebald's use of photographs provides an example of this blurring: "This device contributes to the ontological hide-and-seek that Sebald plays with his readers, which both invites and thwarts attempts to separate fact from fiction" ("History" 117-118).³⁶

Sebald's purposeful play with fact and fiction spills over into his characterization of his narrator. In many of Sebald's texts "W. G. Sebald" is the name attached to the historical figure identified as author of the text and the primary narrator. However, Sebald's construction of a narrator who shares many (although not all) biographic details with him consciously provokes confusion in the minds of his readers. This deliberate destabilizing also tends to lead critics to switch between their discussions of Sebald the author and Sebald the narrator, often forgetting that one is a fictional character who cannot be spoken of as if he were real.

This "ontological hide-and-seek," to borrow Long's phrase, is something Sebald consciously constructs in both his interviews and his texts ("History"

³⁶ Both Wolff and Zisselsberger refer to Claudia Öhlschläger's work on Sebald, where she "categorizes the tension between facticity and fictionality as being part of an unrelenting play of authentication and deception" (Wolff 92). Zisselsberger looks at how Öhlschläger points out that Sebald's "work is concerned primarily with the commemorative function of literary writing and its role in the construction of cultural memory. Central to this commemorative function is the relationship between fact and fiction as well as the insight that all representation involves a degree of distortion" (Zisselsberger 90).

117). In an interview with Joseph Cuomo, for example, Sebald states that an incident in his text “happened in the real world,” at the same time that he calls into question the very nature of the incident’s reality. The discussion concerns an episode in *Vertigo* where the narrator sees twins who display an uncanny resemblance to Kafka. He asks their parents to send him a photograph of them in order to document this coincidence, as he does not have a camera with him at the time. Cuomo asks Sebald if this scenario is based on fact or not, to which Sebald offers the following ambivalent reply: “Well, that particular episode actually happened as it is described [...] And that it should happen in real life seemed to me quite implausible. I mean, sometimes one asks oneself later on whether one’s made it up or not. And it’s not always quite clear” (Sebald in Cuomo 116-117). Sebald’s response deftly turns Cuomo’s question around: asking whether what we think we remember of reality is not actually a fabrication of our own minds? Thus, while in the act of offering something real or documentary in nature, Sebald undermines its referentiality. Undeterred, Cuomo asks if the character of Austerlitz, like Paul Bereyter, is based on someone Sebald knew. Sebald’s answer reveals his conviction that fact and fiction are inseparable and that memory is inherently unstable.

Carole Angier’s interview reveals a similar obsession with differentiating between fact and fiction in Sebald’s work. Her preoccupation seems provoked by the use of photographs in *The Emigrants*. In the introduction to her interview, Angier writes the following:

What is going on? [The Emigrants] is the opposite of a tricky, self-conscious, postmodern novel. It is exquisitely written; but it is modest and quiet and does not draw attention to itself at all. And yet this book raises the question of its own status more vividly, more directly, than any frivolous literary game. [...] Is it fact or

fiction? How did Vladimir Nabokov get into all the stories, even into Max Ferber's mother's diary? And who is W. G. Sebald? (Sebald and Angier 64)

The majority of Angier's questions attempt to distinguish truth from fiction in Sebald's texts. Sebald's responses show his intentional blend of factual inspiration and fictional craft. When Angier asks whether the people in *The Emigrants* are "real people" and if their stories are "real stories," Sebald parries: "Essentially, yes, with some small changes" (Sebald and Angier 70).³⁷ Sebald's answer reveals his position regarding the inherent hybridity of fact and fiction. When Angier asks about the photographs of his great-uncle's diary in the text, Sebald admits that those pictures are "falsifications" and that he wrote the journal and photographed it himself (Sebald and Angier 72). He then explains that while all the major, dramatic details of the stories are based on truth, the minor ones involve the writer's imagination: "What matters is all true. The big events—the schoolteacher putting his head on the railway line, for instance—you might think those were made up for dramatic effect. But on the contrary, they are all real. The invention comes in at the level of minor detail most of the time, to provide *l'effet du réel*" (Sebald and Angier 72). Sebald hints here at the difference between the *effect* of the real and the real. Angier pries specifically into photographs, asking which of the two models that inform the character of Ferber is in the photograph of him as a boy (this photograph appears on page 171 in *The Emigrants*). She relates Sebald's answer:

He smiles, a combination of the ironic and the open, and says, 'Neither.' 'Ninety percent of the photographs are genuine,' he adds quickly, like someone throwing a life belt to a drowning man. But

³⁷ It is telling of her desire to relate the fictional world to the actual work that Angier uses the word "people" rather than speaking of Sebald's "characters." If she had asked if the "characters" in the story were "real people", the redundancy of the question would be more explicit.

that leaves 10 percent which aren't. ... And what about the other 'documents?' The message on Adelwarth's visiting card, for example [...] Sebald wrote that too. And Ambros's travel diary? Sebald wrote about half of it. (Sebald and Angier 73)³⁸

From this evidence, Angier argues that *The Emigrants* is fiction:

This is the answer to my question, then: *The Emigrants* is fiction. And the photographs and documents are part of the fiction. It's a sophisticated undertaking, and perhaps a dangerous one, given its subject [...] If literature can be made of this subject, it must be like this, solidly grounded in the real world. Besides, he himself has more doubts than anyone, which he expresses in Max Ferber. (Sebald and Angier 74)

Angier therefore suggests that although Sebald's texts are fictional, that they are "grounded in the real world". However, while Sebald's literature might give the appearance of being "grounded," it takes measures to undermine the dependability of this link with the real world. Throughout her discussion of what is truth and what is fiction in *The Emigrants*, Angier seems to suggest that the work is non-fiction (by asking for the facts and referring to characters as "people"). However, when she concludes that the work is "fiction" in the above passage, she still conflates the narrator within the world of the text and the author outside the world of the text as if the text were non-fiction. It is precisely slippages such as these that Sebald's destabilizing texts provoke. They show that the boundaries between fact and fiction cannot be maintained when speaking about his texts. Angier remarks that the effect of Sebald's literature is to make the reader feel a bit "dizzy" (74); I read her use of this word as an indication of the destabilizing nature Sebald creates within the world of the text.

³⁸ Sebald's defence of his photography in this passage above repeats almost entirely his answer in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel: "Ninety percent of the images inserted into the text could be said to be authentic, i.e., they are not from other sources used for the purpose of telling the tale" (Sebald and Wachtel 41).

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, when asked specifically about his use of photographs in *The Emigrants* and how they often seem to trigger a search for the stories of others, Sebald replies that one of purposes of the photographs in his texts is to verify the work and construct it as realist fiction: “the photographs allow the narrator, as it were, to legitimize the story he tells” (Sebald and Wachtel 41). However, when Sebald admits that he feels the need to include photographs in his texts as a means of authenticating the work, what he is really proposing is that his use of photographs gives his texts the *effect* of authentication: which is to use authentication in order to call it into question. Anderson remarks on this intentional tension: “Challenging the reader to believe in and simultaneously doubt the authenticity of [his] [...] images, [...] Sebald ultimately question[s] the notion that the world and its representations can be divided into entirely separate categories of truth and fiction, into factual ‘documents’ and aesthetic constructs. There is no ‘pure’ ‘historical document’” (“Documents” 150). Anderson is referring here to Sebald’s statement that fact and fiction are not alternatives.

Ruth Franklin has more perceptively argued that Sebald’s works hold fact and fiction in tension, especially through his use of photographs (123). She suggests that “though the books are marked by an extraordinary profusion of facts [...] fiction pulls at them with the force of gravity” (Franklin 123). Franklin sees this evidence of fiction at work in the way repetition is integrated into Sebald’s texts—citing the image of the butterfly man in each story of *The Emigrants* and the repeated images of Kafka in all four parts of *Vertigo*. Furthermore, Franklin points out that the tension between fact and fiction is epitomised in the Sebaldian narrator. She writes: “His narrator (the books share

a single voice) occasionally offers biographical details that are identical to Sebald's own life [...]. Yet these details, like the photographs, obscure as much as they reveal" (Franklin 124). Franklin therefore sees the tension between fact and fiction as causing a level of "disequilibrium" in Sebald's works (126). However, she reads this as unreliability and therefore as problematic. Disequilibrium, however, is not something which Sebald seeks to avoid, as I have shown.

4. Structural Postmemory

Sebald's oeuvre has elicited substantial secondary discussion involving the concept of postmemory for the following reasons: Sebald himself, and many of his primary characters, would be categorized as belonging to "the generation after" and his works thematize the transmission of memory. Furthermore, as Hirsch's concept of postmemory is primarily linked to the visual use of photography in the telling of stories, Sebald's use of photographs throughout his texts has encouraged discussions of the role of photography in postmemory.³⁹ While Sebald's texts portray elements of postmemory at a thematic level, as critics have pointed out, it is his construction of postmemory at a *structural* level in his texts that I will explore. Hirsch herself has emphasised the structural nature of her concept: "Postmemory is not a movement, method or idea; I see it, rather, as a *structure* of inter- and transgenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience" ("Generation" 106; original emphasis). For Hirsch, this focus on the structure means, "that postmemory is not an *identity* position but a *generational* structure of transmission deeply embedded in [...] forms of

³⁹ For secondary material which includes discussions about Sebald's work in relation to Hirsch's concept of postmemory, see: Harris (2001), Long (2003), Morgan (2005) and Anderson (2008).

mediation" ("Generation" 187). In both *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, Sebald uses structural strategies to create texts which generate a relationship between the text and the reader that, I argue, functions to transmit the stories carried within the texts.

Hirsch's earlier notions of postmemory, however, have been used to argue the opposite about Sebald's texts: that the thematic portrayals of transmission in Sebald's texts present a narrator who over-identifies with the stories he passes on to the extent that his own story is over-shadowed. Long, for example, has argued that Sebald's "reading of family albums allows him to suture himself into the stories of others and construct a sense of narrative and biographical continuity as a compensation for exile and loss" ("History" 137). He reads Sebald's use of a frame narrator as an illustration of Hirsch's notion of "evacuation" (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 22):

the phenomenon of postmemory is repeatedly dramatized in *Die Ausgewanderten* [as] [i]n all four stories, the author seeks to reconstruct a series of events which took place before his birth but which are all accessible through neither purely 'historical' research nor personal recollection. Moreover, the four life stories pieced together in the course of Sebald's text tend progressively to swamp the narrator's own story. (Long, "History" 123)

When Hirsch speaks about evacuation, she sees it as a potential risk, whereas here, in *The Emigrants*, Sebald makes an obvious choice to use a frame narrator, who is a *fictional* character whose story is *created*. This idea of postmemory causing the evacuation of one's own story is one of Hirsch's ideas that I find somewhat problematic. Hirsch uses the word "risk" when she speaks about how postmemory evacuates the stories of those born under the shadow of other stories. However, it seems that this concept of "risk" is misleading, as ostensibly

those to whom experiences are transmitted at deep levels such as Hirsch describes, do not have a choice when it comes to what memories they inherit? It is unclear, however, whether Hirsch sees affiliative acts of postmemory as entailing the same level of risk as familial acts. Anderson points out that although the concept of postmemory “has an obvious persuasive force for Sebald’s historical position,” it needs to be asked “whether Hirsch’s (and by extension Long’s) description of postmemory is not too generous a category, which all but erases the historical subjectivity of different viewers” (“Documents” 142). Anderson argues that “[b]y ‘expanding’ the postmemorial circle to ‘viewers who are personally connected to the event *and those who are not*,’ Hirsch effaces not only the difference between direct witnesses and would-be witnesses but also the continuing ideological force of the original event for present viewers” (“Documents” 142). These are indeed important questions, yet Anderson’s reading of Hirsch—and by extension, Long—appears to be based on an understanding of postmemory as an identity position and not as a structure of transmission, which is how I employ the concept in relation to Sebald. By attempting to avoid the identity politics of direct witnesses and would-be-witnesses, Hirsch focuses on structures of transmission which enable a broader category of proxy-witnesses to carry the legacy of the Holocaust forward at a time when the generation of direct witnesses is “passing into history” (“Generation” 104).

Peter Morgan proposes that Long and others’ use of the concept of postmemory with regard to Sebald is misplaced.⁴⁰ Morgan finds Long’s use of the term “suturing” for the narrator’s bond with the stories he tells “ethically

⁴⁰ He refers specifically to Arthur Williams and J. J. Long.

questionable” for a German born into the second-generation (195-196).

Morgan’s argument, however, relies on a conception of memory based on Avishai Margalit’s work, *The Ethics of Memory*, which insists on witnessing based on lived experience and not on hearsay (Morgan, 198). His argument is premised on identity politics, which is something Hirsch has endeavoured to distance herself from in her more recent definitions of postmemory. As a result, Morgan admits that Margalit would most likely not “sympath[ize] with the idea of postmemory” (Morgan, 198).⁴¹ To bring theories of actual witnessing into discussion of fictional witnessing is problematic, however, as it conflates two very distinct genres. Morgan demonstrates this conflation of genres when he misreads a passage in *Austerlitz* in his efforts to show how the narrator’s suturing is questionable:

Long’s usage of the concept of ‘suturing,’ as a means of melding Sebald’s second-generation memory with that of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust is questionable for a second-generation German who grew up in an Alpine village scarcely touched by the war. The narrator of *Austerlitz* even recognizes in himself a ‘self-censorship of my mind, the constant suppression of the memories surfacing in me.’ That Sebald the narrator seeks to inhabit the minds and souls of his interlocutors as a means of escaping the pincer-movement of guilt and national identity is already clear in *Die Ausgewanderten* and is taken to epic lengths in the final work, *Austerlitz*. (195-6)

The words in this passage that Morgan quotes, however, are actually not the words of the narrator, but those of Austerlitz: “Yet this self-censorship of my mind, the constant suppression of the memories surfacing in me, Austerlitz continued, demanded ever greater efforts” (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 198). Morgan therefore misreads the text in this instance and as a result his line of

⁴¹ Morgan’s article is written prior to Hirsch’s redefinition of postmemory, however, and relies solely on Hirsch’s article, “Projected Memory” (1999).

argumentation reveals the impossibility of reading Sebald's text as an instance of non-fictional witnessing. Furthermore, in his accusation of what he sees to be Sebald's attempts to be a moral witness Morgan suggests that Austerlitz has a life outside of the fictional realm:

[I]t is not Sebald's narrative details which are problematic, but rather the status of the observer himself, who so clearly merges self and other, past and present, victim and perpetrator, memory and history. Sebald cannot be a moral witness [...] A moral witness is a species of eyewitnesses for Margalit, and no amount of postmemory or 'suturing' of German and Jewish, and first- and second-generational experiences and memories will create the conditions for Sebald to remember as Jacques Austerlitz does. (199)

I would like to draw attention here to the way Morgan presumes that the fictional character, Jacques Austerlitz, has an *actual memory* of an event which Sebald the author (or narrator) would not have access to. In his desire to address the ethics of Sebald's stance as a moral witness, Morgan forgets for a moment that this is fiction that he is discussing when he speaks of Austerlitz as if he is more than a character within the fictional world.

Yet one of Morgan's main critiques of Sebald is that he "avoids the question of narrative voice" through his insistence on not terming his works novels (194). Morgan argues that this calls the validity of Sebald's works into question. "Sebald maintains the dual validity of this work [Austerlitz] as history and literature, documentation and imaginative reconstruction of lives in the shadow of Auschwitz," writes Morgan, arguing that Sebald's avoidance of narrative clarity clashes with his use of "the terminology of historical fact, reality, biography and reportage," and as a result, "his avowal of the separation of voices is evasive and disingenuous" (194). What I would like to consider,

however, is how Sebald's evasiveness might not be considered "disingenuous" as Morgan suggests, but rather an instance of productive instability.

In her more recent work, Hirsch acknowledges the role Sebald's texts have played in her continued revising of the concept of postmemory.⁴² She devotes a whole section of her paper to answering the question "Why Sebald?" in which she claims that, "[t]he cultural postmemory work that Art Spiegelman and *Maus* did in the late 1980s/early 1990s is what the recently deceased German writer W. G. Sebald, and particularly his novel *Austerlitz*, is doing now, in the first decade of the new millennium" ("Generation" 118).⁴³ Hirsch argues that Sebald blurs the generational boundaries in *Austerlitz*, resulting in the text illustrating the relationship between affiliative and familial postmemory. She suggests that Sebald's work in *Austerlitz* is characteristic of "our turn-of-the-century remembrance," which, while incorporating familial and indexical relations, is "a less literal, much more fluid conception of both" ("Generation" 119). This more fluid conception demonstrates what Hirsch means by affiliative postmemory. She writes:

The generational structure of *Austerlitz* and its particular kind of postmemory is more complicated [than the straight father-son illustration of familial postmemory in *Maus*] [...] The conversations in the novel are intragenerational, between the narrator and the

⁴² Hirsch is presumably responding to body of literature which has brought her concept of postmemory into conversation with Sebald's work. Curiously, however, while most the secondary material on Sebald and postmemory focuses on *The Emigrants*, Hirsch restricts her discussion to Sebald's *Austerlitz* and makes no mention of *The Emigrants*.

⁴³ Hirsch provides the following comparison of the two works: "*Maus* and *Austerlitz* share a great deal: a self-conscious, innovative, and critical aesthetic that palpably conveys absence and loss; the determination to know about the past and the acknowledgement of its elusiveness; the testimonial structure of listener and witness separated by relative proximity and distance to the events of the way (two men in both works); the reliance on looking and reading, on visual media in addition to verbal ones; and the consciousness that the memory of the past is an act firmly located in the present. Still, the two authors could not be more different: one the son of two Auschwitz survivors, a cartoonist who grew up in the United States; the other a son of Germans, a literary scholar and novelist writing in England" (Hirsch 2008: 119). However, not only are there differences between these two authors, but their texts work within very different genres as well.

protagonist [...] Standing outside the family, the narrator receives the story from Austerlitz and *affiliates* with it, thus illustrating the relationship between familial and affiliative postmemory. As a German, he also shows how the lines of affiliation can cross the divide between victim and perpetrator. (Hirsch “Generation” 119)

However, I would argue that Sebald’s texts offer a different kind of affiliative postmemory to that which Hirsch reads in them. Postmemory is not transmitted to the narrator in *Austerlitz*, but rather Austerlitz shares his story with the narrator and passes it on to him for further dissemination.⁴⁴

Sebald’s play at authenticity, however, causes Hirsch to declare that he is not concerned with authenticity. She argues that while there is an anxiety for correct authentication in Spiegelman’s work, “[t]hat authentication, and even any concern about it, has disappeared in *Austerlitz*” (“Generation” 120). Hirsch’s main critique of Sebald’s text is that the photographs are “blurry” and “hard-to-make-out” and that they therefore “[speak] somehow [of] a generation marked by a history to which they have lost even the distant and now barely ‘living connection’ to which *Maus* uncompromisingly clings” (“Generation” 120). It seems that Hirsch views a living connection with the past as a necessary prerequisite for concern about authentication. While some of the photographs in *Austerlitz* are, as Hirsch argues, “blurry,” this is not the case with many of the other photographs in the novel: there are clear diagrams and clear pictures of buildings, monuments, animals, moths and people.⁴⁵ Hirsch focuses on the two maternal images from *Austerlitz*—which, it must be admitted, are grainy—in order to argue that “[e]ven for the familial second (or 1.5) generation, pictures are no more than spaces of projection, approximation, and affiliation; they have

⁴⁴ See my discussion of caretakers in the section 7 of the Introduction.

⁴⁵ See photographs on pages 3, 18, 32, 43, 55, 106, 118, 119, 120, 187, 203, 214, 268-269, 303, 321, 326, 357, 361, 396 and 397 for example.

retained no more than an *aura* of indexicality. For more distant affiliative descendants, their referential link to a sought-after past is ever more questionable" ("Generation" 122).⁴⁶ However, I would like to suggest that it is not that a concern for authentication has disappeared in Sebald, but rather that the very nature of the concern is called into question by the working of the text. As I will explore in the following sections of this chapter, Sebald specifically questions our need for authentication, as well as the very means by which we seek authentication of the past.

By including photographs of the stage and stills of staged films in his texts, Sebald highlights the constructed nature and potential malleability of images. "The images which Austerlitz finds," Hirsch writes (about the maternal images in *Austerlitz*), "are, in themselves, products of performances – his mother was an actress before the war, and what is more, in the propaganda film in Terezín, all inmates were forced to play a part that would further the working of the Nazi death machine" ("Generation" 122-123). Hirsch suggests that this performative element adds a layer of impenetrability between the viewer who seeks the truth and the event that the photograph is meant to capture ("Generation" 122). Hirsch's discussion of the photographs in *Austerlitz* concerns the potential perils she sees in her broadening of the concept of postmemory to include the affiliative connection. She argues that the photographs in *Austerlitz* "call reference into question," as they show "the index of postmemory (as opposed to memory) is the performative index, shaped more and more by affect, need, and

⁴⁶ The one picture which Austerlitz suggests *might* be of his mother is a still of the Theresienstadt film in which there is a woman in the background whose face is partially obscured by the time stamp (*Austerlitz* 351); the other is a photograph Austerlitz finds in the Prague Theatrical archives of an anonymous actress "who seemed to resemble [his] dim memory of [his] mother" (*Austerlitz* 353).

desire as time and distance attenuate the links to authenticity and ‘truth’” (“Generation” 124). This is another way in which Sebald calls photographs’ referentiality into question. However, although Sebald and Hirsch would agree that the staged nature of photographs of performances serves to highlight the instability of the medium, both author and theorist would also suggest that these images work productively. These photographs of staged performances serve to highlight the malleability and susceptibility for distortion in the photographic medium. Hirsch does suggest, however, that the generation of affiliative postmemory requires familiar tropes, such as the figure of maternal loss, which, she feels, demonstrate to a certain extent the “unravelling link between present and past that defines indexicality as no more than performative” (“Generation” 125). Hirsch concludes that “Austerlitz’s description of the film still throws ever more doubt on the process of postmemorial looking” as he misreads the image of the necklace around the lady’s neck, which, for Hirsch, questions his ability to view and remember, while also making reference to the image of the mother in Barthes’s description of his mother’s photograph in *Camera Lucida* (“Generation” 123). She concludes by suggesting that “for better or worse” the pre-formed images which the postgeneration uses function in a similar way to the “protective shield of trauma itself,” in that the screen memories, or pre-formed images, “absorb the shock, filter and diffuse the impact of trauma, diminish harm” (“Generation” 125). Thus Hirsch suggests that “in forging a protective shield particular to the postgeneration, one could say that, paradoxically, they [screen memories] actually reinforce the *living* connection between past and present, between the generation of witnesses and survivors and the generation after” (“Generation” 125). Thus, the perils of more broadly affiliative

postmemory seem to create connection even as they undermine it. Hirsch admits that this is a paradox, yet she sees it as an effective one. The same can be said for Sebald's use of fake or forged photographs.

Sebald's use of photographs in his texts both follows and responds to specific passages from Roland Barthes's seminal enquiry into the nature of photographs, *Camera Lucida*. Hirsch has pointed out the points of connection between Barthes's description of the *punctum* and his description of the photograph of his mother in *Camera Lucida* and Austerlitz's blurry photograph of a woman wearing a pearl necklace that he hopes is his mother ("Generation" 123).⁴⁷ However, she does not draw the connection between Austerlitz's tampering with the photograph—blowing it up in order to study it in minute detail—and the following passage from Barthes:

If I like a photograph, it if disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing, during the whole time I remain with it? I look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or the person it represents [...] my mother's face is vague, faded [...] I want to outline the loved face by thought, to make it into the unique field of an intense observation; I want to enlarge this face in order to see it better, to understand it better, to know its truth [...] I believe that by enlarging the detail "in series" (each shot engendering smaller details than the preceding stage), I will finally reach my mother's very being. (Barthes 99).

That Austerlitz's engagement with what he hopes is a photograph of his mother follows this same progression of enlargement and frustrated scrutiny, speaks of the possibility of Sebald's specific engagement with Barthes. Barthes argued that photographs attest to what "has indeed existed," and therefore authenticate

⁴⁷ The *punctum* for Barthes is that part of the photograph, the photographic "detail" which "pricks" us upon viewing the image (42-43). The function of the *punctum* is both to reveal the specific gaze of the viewer (for the detail is activated by the specific memories and significances of each individual viewer) and to "trigge[r]" or "provoke[e] a tiny shock" of response in the viewer (49).

themselves, while he proposed that language was inherently fictional: “No writing can give me this certainty. It is the misfortune [...] of language not to be able to authenticate itself. [...] language is, by nature, fictional; [...] but the Photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself” (Barthes 85-87). Sebald’s response, whether specifically directed at Barthes or not, is to show that photographs can indeed be inauthentic and that, like language, they do not provide certainty.

5. Documentary Expectation

Much of the debate over the facts in Sebald’s fiction stems from his practice of including his material sources in his texts. However, while Sebald offers photographs as authenticating components within his texts, he also calls their authenticity into question. His use of photographs is more nuanced than simply supplying documentary evidence: he actively plays with the expectation of documentary evidence in his readers. Long draws attention to this when he outlines the two ways that photographs are most commonly used in texts and shows how Sebald’s works do not conform to either of these patterns:

Narratives that seek, like Sebald’s, to reconstruct or revalue family history and biographical itineraries tend to use photographic images in one or two ways. [...] biographies and autobiographies [...] frequently include photographic plates that may even occupy a separate quire and whose primary function is documentary. Such photographs assume a ‘naïve’ reader for whom the images refer to a reality that is ontologically prior to the text that frames them. On the other hand, numerous post-war novelists have used family snaps as a starting point for narrative meditations [...] In all these works, however, photographs are merely described; they are not reproduced within the pages of the text. In the first instance, then, photographs exist as pure evidence, while in the second instance

they are paradoxically accessible solely through the interpretations to which they give rise. ("History" 117)

Sebald's avoidance of these typical uses of photographic images in narratives thus invites his reader to recognize her expectation of the documentary nature of photographs as flawed. Truth effects can easily be produced in fiction: this does not make them factual, but rather calls attention to the inherent hybridity of the medium.

There is a crucial section towards the end of *The Emigrants* which throws the questions of referentiality of photographs and their documentary weight into dispute. The photograph discussed forms part of Max Ferber's musings and verbal memoirs that the narrator retells. Ferber recounts his memories of Uncle Leo, insisting that photographs were altered in order to be used as Nazi propaganda:

I now remember (said Ferber) that Uncle Leo [...] once showed Father a newspaper clipping dating from 1933, with a photograph of the book burning on the Residenzplatz in Würzburg. That photograph, said Uncle, was a forgery. The burning of the books took place on the evening of the 10th of May, he said – he repeated it several times – the books were burnt on the evening of the 10th of May, but since it was already dark, and they couldn't take any decent photographs, they simply took a picture of some other gathering outside the palace, Uncle claimed, and added a swathe of smoke and a dark night sky. In other words, the photographic document published in the paper was a fake. (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 183)

The emphasis on the date (which Ferber's uncle repeats in this passage) and the place both further the sense of historic authenticity of this photograph. As Barthes writes, "the date belongs to the photograph" (Barthes 84). The repetition of the date in this passage therefore also signals the conversation taking place between Sebald's intentional use of an inauthentic photograph and Barthes

insistence on the nature of photographs as evidence of “*what has been*” (Barthes 85). However, Ferber’s uncle highlights that not only are photographs not to be trusted as simple reproductions of the real, but they are also dangerous tools of propaganda. Propaganda relies on the viewer’s uncritical reception of documentary evidence and purposefully discourages critical engagement. Ferber’s uncle, who is the only one who speaks out about what is happening to his people, is also the one who is able to see through the presumed authenticity of things like photographs.

If one photograph in the text is revealed to be a forgery, and therefore questionable evidence, the reader should be reminded of how easily photographs are altered. Photographs themselves are carefully constructed representations and not simply portrayals of the real. Sebald’s deliberate insertion of, and drawing attention to, a fake photograph in his text should remind his readers of the potential fabrication of all his images and the unreliability of even the photographs that appear to be real. The narrator’s response to the story of this photograph offers a model: rather than relying on hearsay, he seeks out the photograph in order to determine its veracity:

At first I too found the Würzburg story, which Ferber said he was only then remembering for the first time, somewhat on the improbable side; but in the meantime I have tracked down the photograph in question in a Würzburg archive, and as one can easily see there is indeed no doubt that Ferber’s [photo inserted] uncle’s suspicions were justified. (*The Emigrants* 184)

By taking the time to find the photograph in question, the narrator demonstrates careful, yet sceptical engagement with photographs, rather than a dangerously naïve acceptance of them as documentary evidence. His response therefore models an alternative response to propaganda.

Arthur Lubow has discussed the same forged photograph in *The Emigrants* to argue that Sebald's use of photographs in his texts involves precarious play with a highly manipulative medium. Lubow remarks that Sebald's use of photographs is subtle and yet potentially risky: "Insidiously, the photographs also make the text appear to be not fictional but real, despite the widespread knowledge that even in the predigital age, photographs could be manipulated" (162). Sebald's use of photographs thus lures the reader into assuming a level of referentiality, while simultaneously placing unreliable photographs within his text that call attention to the dubious nature of photographs as representations of the real. Lubow writes: "For Sebald, there could be no better touchstone for the importance and difficulty of getting to the truth than a doctored document of the Nazi destruction of the written word" (163). Lubow quotes Sebald: "It's one way of making obvious that you don't begin with a white page, [...] You do have sources, you do have materials. If you create something that seems as if it proceeded seamlessly from your pen, then you hide the material sources of your work" (Sebald in Lubow 162). However, revealing one's sources results in revealing the constructed nature of the work, which is precisely what Sebald points to. Sebald therefore questions the very nature of photography in the same way that his narrator voices concerns about the "questionable business of writing" which I will discuss in the next chapter (*The Emigrants* 230).

Thus, while Long proposes that the photographs help the narrator to avoid "unregulated fantasy" in his explorations of postmemory, I would suggest that Sebald himself problematizes this through his deliberate inclusion of a forged photograph ("History" 123). Long argues that:

Hirsch's claim that postmemory is mediated by 'imaginative investment and creation' needs modification (and is indeed modified in her own practice), because imagination and creation alone could lead to constructions of pure fantasy possessing no connection to the real. [...] For postmemory to function as a useful analytic tool and to carry the ethical burden that Hirsch places upon it, it must be distinguished from unregulated fantasy. The mental constructions of postmemory must exist in some kind of dialogue with the empirical, must be open to confirmation or contestation by the real. One way in which this can happen is through photography [...] ("History" 123-124)

This claim of Long's is problematic, as photographs that are altered or obvious tools of truth-distortion such as propaganda, cannot function to provide a connection with the real. Interestingly, Long never makes reference to the forged photograph in his essay, and so does not engage in a discussion of Sebald's explicit critique of photographs as documentary evidence.

Sebald's narrator does, however, display concerns about unchecked fantasy projections in his story of Paul Bereyter. The narrator admits to trying to imagine Paul's life: "And so, belatedly, I tried to get closer to him, to imagine what his life was like [...] Such endeavours to imagine his life and death did not, as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 29). As a result, the narrator calls this type of presumptuous imaginative creation "trespass."⁴⁸ He writes: "It is in order to avoid this sort of wrongful trespass that I have written down what I know of Paul Bereyter" (*The Emigrants* 29). So, while Sebald's narrator admits that it is important to avoid unregulated fantasy, or "wrongful trespass," his solution here is to write down what he

⁴⁸ The sentiment here is similar to that displayed by Jakob in *Fugitive Pieces* where he speaks of his attempts to imagine Bella and the unnamed dead as "blasphemy" (Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* 167-168). This concept comes up again in my discussion of Schlink's novel in Chapter 5.

knows. Jan Ceuppens provides a thought provoking discussion on writing as the narrator's response to the over-identification involved in imagining the other: "Curiously, Sebald's narrator intends to avoid these excesses by writing. What is at stake here is a quest for the appropriate distance with regard to the object under scrutiny" ("Transcripts" 254). Writing, however, is also a questionable business, as both Sebald and his narrator have claimed. Thus, as there is no stable method to avoid these forms of trespass, Sebald's texts admit that the workings of postmemory are fraught with "dubious" practices such as these (Sebald, *Natural History* 159). This draws attention to the way the whole process of memory is unstable.

6. Textual Pauses

To close, I return to the image of Austerlitz's photograph table to argue that the way that these photographs are presented to the narrator is significant: they present a call to more careful engagement. The photographs on the table form a loose collection. They are not set in a linear progression, as would be, say, photographs placed in a specific sequence in an album (The photographs the narrator receives in *The Emigrants* are all set in albums). Rather, Austerlitz's photographs have no fixed sequence and his primary activity with them is to continually play with their connections and correspondences as if engaged in an endless mnemonic game:

Austerlitz told me that he sometimes sat here for hours, laying out these photographs or others from his collection the wrong way up, as if playing a game of patience, and that then, one by one, he turned them over, always with a new sense of surprise at what he saw, pushing the pictures back and forth and over each other, arranging them in an order depending on their family

resemblances, or withdrawing them from the game until either there was nothing left but the grey table top, or he felt exhausted by the constant effort of thinking and remembering and had to rest on the ottoman. (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 167-168)⁴⁹

A few things immediately stand out in this passage. First, the reference to using the photographs in a “game” of “family resemblances” recalls Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein proposed that things which we might think of as being connected by one key commonality may actually be connected by a network of overlapping resemblances where no one element is common to all:

similarities crop up and disappear.
And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of details.
I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family [...] overlap and criss-cross in the same way. (*Philosophical Investigations* §66 & 67)

To see family resemblances, however, requires careful examination. Thus, this patient task of studying and working with the resemblances of the photographs is part of what Austerlitz passes on to the narrator when he suggests that he “study the black and white photographs” (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 408). The word “study” implies a deeper level of engagement with the photographs on the part of the viewer than simply viewing them in a predetermined sequence or narrative.

Sebald himself has suggested that one of the functions of the photographs in his texts is to invite such careful engagement. Photographs encourage the reader to stop and “*look and see*,” as Wittgenstein puts it (*Philosophical*

⁴⁹ This reminds me of the way Max Ferber, one of the four emigrants in *The Emigrants*, experiences exhaustion from his own artistic process and from reading his mother’s memoirs. I will discuss the significance of Max Ferber’s artistic projects in more detail in Chapter 4.

Investigations §66). Photographs, Sebald has said, arrest the passage of time in the novel, provoking the reader to slow down in the process of reading:

Fiction is an art form that moves in time, that is inclined towards the end, that works on a negative gradient, and it is very, very difficult in that particular form in the narrative to arrest the passage of time. And as we all know, this is what we like so much about certain forms of visual art—you stand in a museum and you look at one of those wonderful pictures somebody did in the sixteenth or the eighteenth century. You are taken out of time, and that is in a sense a form of redemption, if you can release yourself from the passage of time. And the photographs can also do this—they act like barriers or weirs which stem the flow. I think that is something that is positive, slowing down the speed of reading, as it were. (Sebald in Wachtel 41-42)

Photographs therefore create textual pauses in the novel, which Sebald sees as effective as they create space for reflection on the part of the reader. He uses the curious phrase, “a form of redemption,” to describe the value he sees in this carefully engaged and present form of reading. Therefore, through giving the narrator access to his house and, thus, to his photographs, Austerlitz is inviting the narrator to participate in the viewing and constructing of his narrative like he does: through the careful and slow study of his photographs. The narrator is called to an active role in keeping Austerlitz’s story alive: he is handed all that is left of Austerlitz’s life, as if he were a kind of caretaker.

However, Sebald’s portrayal of the narrator inheriting Austerlitz’s story would be what many would argue as being over-identification in the story of another. The narrator accepts responsibility for Austerlitz’s story and is invited to play an active role in constructing how it is told; however, it is Austerlitz who explicitly invites the narrator to participate in the construction and telling of his story. By demonstrating his process of studying the photographs, Austerlitz

encourages the narrator's own sequencing and connections he might draw from the photographs. Sebald thus embeds the idea of an infinite variety of readings of the photographs inside the novel: both through the picture of the photographs on the table, which may be continually moved and replaced (which bring out new family resemblances with each new placement), and also through Austerlitz's invitation of and allowance for the narrator to find his own connections.⁵⁰

J. J. Long, however, in his reading of the photographs in *The Emigrants*, argues that the narrative of the text fixes the photographs' interpretations. "The relationship between family photography and narrative in [*The Emigrants*] is one of interdependence," writes Long, where "photographs function as the impulse that generates the narrative, and are simultaneously enveloped and 'fixed' in their meaning by the narratives to which they give rise" ("History" 131). Long's idea of the photographs' meaning being "fixed" arises from his observation that certain photographs in *The Emigrants* are only described and not actually included in the text (he refers to the photographs of Paul Bereyter's childhood). He does qualify that this fixity is potentially fragile, however, arguing that the

⁵⁰ Noam Elcott has rightly pointed out that the English translations of Sebald's work have rearranged the placement of the photographs in the text and have thus changed the textual 'captions'—the connection between the photograph and the text which surrounds it. According to Elcott, "Sebald manipulates the layout of his texts so that they double as labels, captions, and titles of photographs" (Elcott 216). As a result, Elcott argues that the nuances of layout in Sebald's text have been virtually eliminated from the English translations: "This is particularly unsettling as more than text or image alone, their rapport in layout dictates the ambivalent position of photography in Sebald's oeuvre" (Elcott 205). However, this notion of fluidity of photographic connections and their continual replacement could lead us to consider that Sebald, like Austerlitz, might have invited the varied placement of his photographs in his texts in different translations. Sebald also worked closely with his translators, which leads me to think he would stress exact placement if he felt it necessary. It could quite possibly be the case that he was not as concerned about where the photographs were in the text or whether they changed their positions in translation, as, like Austerlitz's photographic table, each new layout of a text, each new arrangement of a photograph surrounded by a slightly different part of the narrative, would bring out a different layer or angle on the story and thus highlight the contingency of the photographs?

absence of these photographs allows for the privileging of the narrator's interpretation of the photographs, as the reader of the text cannot formulate her own interpretation without access to the actual photographs described (Long "History" 129-130). This controlled interpretation of specific photographs seems to stand in opposition to the open way in which the narrator of *Austerlitz* (and, by extension, its readers) is encouraged to play with multiple interpretations of the collection of photographs handed to him. What I would like to draw attention to in these two seemingly contradictory examples of passing on in Sebald's texts, is that, in both cases, through the combinations of narrative and photographs (be they replicated within the text or merely described), passing on is occurring in a variety of forms: both carefully constructed and openly fluid. Sebald refrains from using only one method of memorializing. Replicating photographs within the space of the text is one method of passing them on and describing them is another.⁵¹ Both, however, still position the reader so that she inherits these images and memories, whether by their telling or through their replication. And, as with the other texts which I examine in this dissertation, this positioning of the reader occurs in conjunction with the narrator modelling his response in a similar situation. Sebald's conscious destabilizing of the photographs in his text is therefore productive in that it invites the response of the reader at the same time that it encourages the reader to slow down in the process of reading and engage in slow and careful dialogue with the text. In the next chapter I return to

⁵¹ Alternatively, these contradictory ways of passing on in *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* could signal a shift in Sebald's thinking between the writing of the two works. Just as Hirsch's theory of postmemory has evolved from being more fixed in her earlier writing to more loosely open to a variety of possibilities in her later work, so too, could Sebald's views on how best to generate postmemorial structures within his texts have shifted from being more carefully controlled to more open (although, admittedly, he would not have conceptualized it according to Hirsch's terminology).

questions of the nature of aesthetics and consider how Sebald's particular aesthetic extends the discussion of aesthetics which I began in Chapter 2: Sebald's aesthetic focuses on the position of the second generation artist.

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Chapter 4: “The Harried Paper”: An Aesthetic of Failure in W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*

*Since he applied the paint thickly, and then repeatedly scratched it off the canvas as his work proceeded, the floor was covered with a largely hardened and encrusted deposit of droppings, mixed with coal dust, several centimetres thick at the centre and thinning out towards the outer edges, in places resembling the flow of lava. This, said Ferber, was the true product of his continuing endeavours and the most palpable proof of his failure. [...] And indeed, when I watched Ferber working on one of his portrait studies over a number of weeks, I often thought that his prime concern was to increase the dust. (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 161)*

*Writing, such is the résumé of a terrible apprenticeship, is a dubious business, merely more grist to the mill. And yet [...] it is even less defensible to refrain from writing than to go on with it, however senseless it may seem. (Sebald, *Natural History* 159)*

1. Introduction

When one thinks about Sebald’s aesthetic, Ferber immediately comes to mind as the epitome of W. G. Sebald’s exploration of the process of artistic representation and his portrayal of the position of the artist. Indeed, Ferber’s artistic process, as described in *The Emigrants*, has become one of the touchstone passages used to describe Sebald’s approach to writing. Like many of those who are faced with the complexities and quandaries of artistic representation in the wake of the Holocaust, Ferber portrays the inevitable failure of art in his painting and portraits. By “failure,” I do not mean only “failing to occur [...] or be performed,” which is the initial definition provided by the *OED*; rather I use the term in the broader sense of its semantic range, to express “the fact of becoming exhausted or running short, giving way under trial, breaking down in health” and “the fact of failing to effect one’s purpose,” or “want of success” (*OED Online*). Sebald’s portrayal of failure is linked to the conception of aesthetics, as his artists’ experience of failure is measured in relation to their artistic principles. Sebald’s aesthetic of failure encourages us to think of failure in these latter terms. By way

of entry for this chapter, I would like to examine a passage from *The Emigrants* where Ferber's agonized artistic process is described:

Work on the picture of the butterfly man had taken more out of him than any previous painting, for when he started on it, after countless preliminary studies, he not only overlaid it time and again but also, whenever the canvas could no longer withstand the continual scratching-off and re-application of paint, he destroyed it and burnt it several times. The despair at his lack of ability which already tormented him quite enough during the day now invaded his increasingly sleepless nights, so that soon he wept with exhaustion as he worked. (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 174-175)

As the above passage details, Ferber's portrait is created from a series of failed attempts: he performs "countless preliminary studies," while also repeatedly "scratching-off" and overlaying each attempt with each fresh effort. These continual attempts speak of his failure to effect his purpose. Not only do his recurrent attempts fall short of his expectations, they also steadily destroy his canvas, which he discards and burns a number of times. Ferber's method recounted here details the tormented cycle of his artistic endeavours and speaks of failure as physical exhaustion. And yet, despite these torments, Ferber refuses to admit defeat: he continues to paint despite the "despair," the "torment" and the inevitable failure. It is as if not painting would be even worse.

Sebald's portrayal of Ferber, therefore, calls attention to what I call his aesthetic of failure. For, not just in Ferber, but in various other characters throughout his oeuvre, Sebald shows the repeated failures of those who attempt various forms of artistic representation: whether it be writing, painting, drawing or weaving. For Sebald, it is the representation of the attempt that is poignant: because such attempts necessarily fall short of their aim at the same time that they speak of the effort of the artist. Through representing these failed attempts,

Sebald signals the artist's desire to represent and he portrays the urgency to pass on within the space of the text. Sebald's acknowledgement and acceptance of failure that gives his texts their melancholic tone and yet the tireless, continual attempts of his artists gesture towards the hope of success even as they fail.

Sebald's aesthetic can be traced back to his preoccupation with survivor syndrome. As I discussed in the Introduction, survivor syndrome informs Sebald's conceptualization of "the weight of memory". However, in this chapter I consider how Sebald's understanding of survivor syndrome evidences what has been termed Sisyphus syndrome: a syndrome in which a person feels compelled to repeat a self-defeating practice continuously. I therefore begin by exploring how the mythical figure of Sisyphus might function as a template through which to analyse Sebald's artists. I closely examine how failure is portrayed in *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* and I analyse how these varied portraits of artistic endeavour reveal Sebald's aesthetic. I examine the influence of Jean Améry's existentialist approach to writing and inevitable failure on Sebald's aesthetic through reading Sebald's essay on Améry. I follow these existentialist leanings in Sebald and conclude by examining how Camus's reading of *The Myth of Sisyphus* sheds light on the paradoxical glimmer of hope which I see in the midst of Sebald's portrayals of failure.

2. A Sisyphean Burden

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus is known for the senseless never-ending punishment inflicted on him by the gods of the underworld. He is doomed continually to roll a heavy rock up to the top of a mountain, only for it repeatedly to roll back down before ever reaching the top. Sisyphus is thus trapped in a

never-ending cycle of failure. While Sebald makes no explicit mention of Sisyphus, there is a passage in *Austerlitz* that alludes to the underworld and to this myth. The scene occurs in Liverpool Street station, which Austerlitz refers to as “one of the darkest and most sinister places in London, a kind of entrance to the underworld” (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 180). Austerlitz describes watching a railway porter who appears to be caught in a cycle of futile labour:

I remember [...] watching a man who wore a snow-white turban with his shabby porter’s uniform as he wielded a broom, sweeping up the rubbish scattered on the paving. In doing this job, which in its pointlessness reminded me of the eternal punishments that we are told, said Austerlitz, we must endure after death, the white-turbaned porter, oblivious of all around, performed the same movements over and over again using, instead of a proper dustpan, a cardboard box with one side removed, and nudging it along in front of him with his foot, first up the platform and then down again until he had returned to his point of departure. (*Austerlitz* 188)

The reference to the “eternal punishments” of the underworld here recalls Sisyphus, even though he is not specifically mentioned. However, elements of this myth provide insight into Sebald’s melancholy aesthetic of failure as we see it portrayed in *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*. Jacky Bowring makes a brief connection between Walter Benjamin and Sisyphus in an article in which she employs Benjamin’s method to explore two landscape texts: Patrick Keller’s “London” and Robert Smithson’s “The Monuments of Passaic”. Although Bowring does not draw the connection between Sebald and Sisyphus, she does make a very brief mention of Sebald’s photographs within the course of her paper, which therefore positions her comments on Sisyphus, by way of Benjamin, within the reach of Sebald’s texts (Bowring only mentions *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo*).

I refer to Bowring in more detail when I consider the influence of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* on Sebald's portrayal of Austerlitz.

In one reading of the myth, Sisyphus's endless task was meant to be the ultimate punishment for his attempt to escape death. Sisyphus can therefore be considered as a survivor-figure. Furthermore, by escaping death, Sisyphus presents an interesting view of survivor syndrome, when one considers that his triumph over death resulted in his tormented punishments in the underworld – caught between life and death, unable to participate fully in either. As a survivor of death, Sisyphus is punished with a task which is simultaneously impossible and endless, and from which he cannot escape. For Sebald, those who are burdened with the impossible and endless task of representing the trauma of the Holocaust are usually those who have escaped death: this category of survivors includes both those who survived the immediate wake of destruction and those born after it (who inherit the memory). Thus, in Sebald, survivor syndrome is conflated with Sisyphus syndrome, in which a person feels compelled to repeat a self-defeating practice continuously.

What I would like to consider in this chapter is how this conflation of survivor syndrome with a Sisyphean burden provides a parable through which to consider Sebald's portrayals of post-Holocaust artists. Those who bear the burden of survival also bear the burden of representation and remembrance that, at its core, is fraught with impossibility. Sebald's melancholy is generally connected to the heaviness or weight of the tone of his work: this heaviness speaks to the texts carrying of the weight of memory. The Sebaldian narrator absorbs the heaviness of the destruction and desolation, which he sees and experiences as he travels through landscapes in the aftermath of tragedy, and he

expresses the difficulties of the practice of memory as a weight or a burden. If we were to think of this hefty burden in terms of Sisyphus's rock, then the tormented cycle of bearing it reveals the position of the survivors and those who come after them. For the most part, this burden is ineluctable, and so the narrators and others in Sebald's works, much like the mythical Sisyphus, struggle with what seems both an impossible and yet an endless task. However, as my discussion of Sebald's texts will show, while these works are melancholy in tone, there are also elements of hope at play in Sebald's portrayals of failure.

3. Failure in *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*

When Sebald tells Eleanor Wachtel that it is his interest in survivor syndrome that connects the four stories that make up *The Emigrants*, he lists the names of four Holocaust survivors who committed suicide as a result of the tormented burden or survival: Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Paul Celan and Tadeusz Borowski (Sebald in Wachtel 38). However, these four survivors Sebald names are also all writers who attempted to give artistic expression to their experiences, despite the fact that they ultimately succumbed to "the weight of memory". Sebald's character, Max Ferber, is therefore cast amongst these Holocaust survivors, who struggle to find ways to express and represent the horrors they have endured. Out of all of Sebald's characters, Ferber poignantly demonstrates a Sisyphus-like burden. In *The Emigrants*, the narrator describes how Ferber sees his work as an inescapable never-ending task: "the painter [...] had been working there since the late Forties, ten hours a day, the seventh day not excepted" (*The Emigrants* 160). As the story is set in the late '60s (two decades after Ferber moves to Manchester) and spans over two decades itself, the reader can deduce that

Ferber has been working tirelessly for over 40 years, seven days a week, ten hours a day. He displays a Sisyphean version of survivor syndrome, in that his method reveals the inevitability of failure when attempting to represent an object after the Holocaust.

Initially Ferber attempts to escape the burden of survival; however, he soon realizes that as a survivor, he carries a sense of responsibility which is inescapable. A year after hearing about his parents' deportation and probable death, Ferber decides to move to Manchester to escape the trauma of his past. He tells the narrator: "I did not want to be reminded of my origins [...] I imagined I could begin a new life in Manchester [...] but instead, Manchester reminded me of everything I was trying to forget" (*The Emigrants* 191). Manchester provides little escape from Ferber's traumatic history as it is populated with Jewish emigrants and loaded with Holocaust signifiers: the narrator describes it as "a soot-blackened city that was steadily drifting towards ruin" (*The Emigrants* 176). Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the visible and invisible in *The Phenomenology of Perception* provides a useful way of thinking about Ferber's experience of Manchester. For Merleau-Ponty, the body forms the vehicle through which the act of perception occurs. A memory, or "significance" that we "carry [...] within" our bodies resonates and activates the invisible history of the landscapes we move through, thus opening up the visible for the viewer (Merleau-Ponty 413).⁵² Ferber's survivor's guilt activates a landscape in Manchester that is, as Merleau-Ponty would say, charged with personal

⁵² I explored the specific affinities between Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology and Sebald's *Austerlitz* in my Master's dissertation, which argued that while a phenomenological approach to Sebald's work provides a valuable conceptual framework through which to engage the novel, there are aspects of this approach that Sebald's work, in its narrative form, is able to extend beyond the boundaries of philosophical discourse.

“particular significance” (413). Thus Ferber’s fixation on the chimneys of Manchester reveals the seemingly invisible traumatic history he carries within himself as a survivor. He remarks that on arriving in Manchester, “[t]he most impressive thing [...] were all the chimneys that towered above the plain [...] thousands of them, side by side, belching out smoke by day and night” (*The Emigrants* 168-169). One cannot avoid the implicit reference to the Holocaust crematoria and their iconic chimneys in these descriptions, which would have similarly “belched out” smoke and ash. Whitehead suggests that Sebald’s characters “are described in terms which closely replicate Freud’s theories of trauma” and that Ferber’s relationship to the city of Manchester is therefore a form of traumatic haunting in which “each detail of his life has been determined by his parents’ deportation and more particularly by the delay before he learnt of their deaths” (Whitehead 199). Furthermore, Ferber remarks that when he saw these chimneys, he “felt [he] had found [his] destiny” (*The Emigrants* 169). Like his art, from which he sees no escape, Manchester “take[s] possession” of Ferber and he feels a sense of duty and responsibility as a result: “I cannot leave,” he tells the narrator, “I do not want to leave, I must not” (*The Emigrants* 169). He later remarks that not only does he feel that being in the city is his destiny, but it also represents his vocation: “I am here, as they used to say, to serve under the chimney” (*The Emigrants* 192). Ferber’s willing acceptance of this vocation suggests that he feels as if he deserves this task, in spite of its impossibility. He therefore paints ceaselessly, despite the “despair,” the “torment” and the failure. It is as if not painting would be worse torment and would renege on his duties as a survivor.

That Ferber sees his work as failed is not an indication of how others perceive his artwork, but rather a signal of the inner turmoil he experiences. His failure therefore speaks of the position of the artist rather than the measure of the artwork. Although the narrator feels that Ferber's portraits succeed in depicting his subjects, Ferber never considers his task done:

Time and again, at the end of a working day, I marvelled to see that Ferber, with a few lines and shadows that had escaped annihilation, had created a portrait of great vividness. And all the more did I marvel when, the following morning, the moment the model had sat down and he had taken a look at him or her, he would erase the portrait yet again, and once more set about excavating the features of his model, who by now was distinctly wearied by this manner of working, from a surface already badly damaged by the continual destruction. [...] and if he [...] decided that the portrait was done, [it was] not so much because he was convinced that it was finished as through sheer exhaustion. (*The Emigrants* 162)

Ferber's inability to complete a portrait exhausts himself and his models. It also damages and even at times destroys his canvases. He is unable to appreciate the "vividness" of his paintings and is only able to see how they fall short of his expectations; this results in the continual process of erasure and reproduction described in the passage above.

However, although Ferber feels that his artwork fails to create successful representations of his models, his work paradoxically succeeds in representing wreckage by registering destruction on his canvases. As an artist, his process is similar to those of Paul Celan and Michaels's Jakob Beer, who sought to wreck language in order to use it to write about the destruction at the core of the Holocaust.⁵³ Ferber's wrecked canvases register destruction within his medium,

⁵³ See my discussion of this in Chapter 2, section 4: "The Effective Failures of Language".

which creates the setting for his portraits. It is against this background of destruction that the ghostly presences that haunt his life are evoked within his portraits.

Ferber's real project, however, is the continual production of the evidence of his artistic shortcomings. Ferber remarks that what is discarded or left over from his painting process is, "the true product of his continuing endeavours and the most palpable proof of his *failure*" (*The Emigrants* 161; emphasis mine). He therefore acknowledges that failure comprises the core of his artistic method and even suggests that it might be considered a product in and of itself.

Comments such as these cause us to reconsider our conceptualization of failure: as Sebald's artists show, it functions as a sign of artistic effort. Ferber's artistic process constitutes a continual process of erasure that results in his studio floor being covered with paint scrapings and layers of dust:

He drew with vigorous abandon, frequently going through half a dozen of his willow-wood charcoal sticks in the shortest of time; and that process of drawing and shading on the thick, leathery paper, as well as the concomitant business of constantly erasing what he had drawn with a woollen rag already heavy with charcoal, really amounted to nothing but a steady production of dust [...] he might reject as many as forty variants, or smudge them back into the paper and overdraw new attempts upon them; [...] an onlooker might well feel that it had evolved from a long lineage of grey ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper. (*The Emigrants* 161-162)

References to the Holocaust are scattered throughout this description. One cannot read words like "charcoal," "dust" and "ash" without them conjuring gas chambers and Holocaust methods of erasure. I am reminded here of Anne Michaels's exploration of the way language is ruined by traumatic events such as

the Holocaust which I discussed in section 4 of Chapter 2. Her poem “What the Light Teaches,” speaks to these concerns:

Language remembers.
Out of obscurity, a word takes its place
in history. Even a word so simple
it’s translatable: number. Oven. (Michaels, *Weight/Miner’s* 113)

Just as words like “number” and “oven” have become loaded Holocaust signifiers, so too have words such as “charcoal,” “dust” and “ash” used in the passage above. Furthermore, as with the words used in Michaels’s poem, it is the collection of words such as these, together with “ghostly,” that conjure further depths of Holocaust traumatic memory. Thus the by-products of Ferber’s artistic production therefore point towards the traumatic past that overshadows his life. For dust, charcoal and ash are also the by-products of the crematoria. What is significant about Ferber’s technique described here, is that despite his unsuccessful attempts to fully portray his subject, it is the evidence of his failure—the barely visible palimpsest of his repeated erasures—that is the very thing which gestures towards the ghostly presences that haunt his process.

Consequently, Ferber is more interested in the by-products of his portraits—the “debris” and the “dust”—than with the portraits themselves. He displays meticulous concern about how these signs of frustrated attempts are portrayed through the presentation of his studio: “It had always been of the greatest importance to him, Ferber once remarked casually, that nothing should change at his place of work, that everything should remain as it was, as he had arranged it, and that nothing further should be added but the debris generated by painting and the dust that continuously fell” (*The Emigrants* 161). This passage suggests that the evidence of Ferber’s failure is more important to him

than his portraits. The narrator sees this, remarking that, “when [he] watched Ferber working on one of his portrait studies over a number of weeks, [he] often thought that [Ferber’s] prime concern was to increase the dust” (*The Emigrants* 161). The word “debris” used in this description of Ferber’s studio recalls a poignant passage from *Fugitive Pieces* in which Michael writes about the Nazi misuse of language as a method of justification: “Humans were not being gassed, only ‘figuren,’ so ethics weren’t being violated. No one could be faulted for burning debris, for burning rags and clutter in the dirty basement of society” (*Fugitive Pieces* 165).⁵⁴ The dust and debris, together with the destruction wrought on the canvas, all speak more loudly of the obliteration of the Jews than any portrait could.

However, more than simply desiring this “proof” of his failure, Ferber states that he loves the dust: “he loved [dust] more than anything else in the world [...] There was nothing he found so unbearable as a well-dusted house, and he felt more at home than in places where things remained undisturbed, muted under the grey, velvety sinter left when matter dissolved, little by little, into nothingness” (*The Emigrants* 161). As a Holocaust signifier, dust is referred to throughout Ferber’s story. He tells the narrator about a dream he has in which he had opened an art exhibition with Queen Victoria where the majority of the artwork came from his father’s “holdings” and a few were his own pieces (*The*

⁵⁴ I considered Agamben’s discussion of the dangers of euphemism in Chapter 2, section 4. In another chapter of his book, “The Muselman”, he considers the specific example of the “figuren” euphemism through a reading of Primo Levi’s conception of the *Muselmänner*: “what defines the *Muselmänner* is not so much that their life is no longer life (this kind of degradation holds in certain sense for all camp inhabitants and is not an entirely new experience) but, rather, that their death is not death (not simply that it does not have importance, which is not new, but that it cannot be called by the name ‘death’)—is the particular horror that the *Muselman* brings to the camp and that the camp brings to the world. But this means—and this is why Levi’s phrase is terrible—that the SS were right to call the corpses *Figuren*. Where death cannot be called death, corpses cannot be called corpses” (Agamben 70).

Emigrants 176). However, in the dream, Ferber passed into a room in the gallery that was covered in layers of dust, which he “recognized as [his] parents’ drawing room” (*The Emigrants* 176). The correlation between dust suggesting the passing of time and the ash of the crematoria combines into a haunting symbol when it is described as covering his family home. Furthermore, the connection created in the dream between Ferber’s paintings and his parents’ home speaks to the underlying trauma that both provokes and haunts his artistic efforts. As such, the dust generated by Ferber’s painting and sketching pays homage to his parents and speaks of the sense of responsibility generated by the continual reminder of the city’s chimneys.

In *The Emigrants* there are many resonances between the narrator’s descriptions of his writing process and Ferber’s artistic technique: both portray failure as an inescapable burden. The narrator uses words to describe the burden of writing which echo those used to speak of Ferber’s labours:

During the winter of 1990/91, in the little free time I had [...] I was working on the account of Max Ferber given above. It was an arduous task. Often I could not get on for hours or days at a time, and not infrequently I unravelled what I had done, continuously tormented by scruples that were taking tighter hold and steadily paralysing me. These scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing. I had covered hundreds of pages with my scribble, in pencil and ballpoint. By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions. Even what I ultimately salvaged as a ‘final’ version seemed to me a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched. (*The Emigrants* 230-231)

The narrator’s use of phrases such as “arduous task,” “tormented scruples” and “steadily paralyzing” all speak to the anguished weight incurred in the process of writing. The more the narrator reflects on the inevitable shortcomings of

language to do justice to his subject, the more paralyzed he feels as a result. Furthermore, like Ferber, the narrator's repeated attempts to write create destruction on the page. Ultimately, the narrator feels that, like Ferber, his writing is a failure: all it produces is a "thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched."

Similarly, Austerlitz's writing endeavours are fraught with insurmountable challenges. When Austerlitz takes early retirement, with the aim of finally writing up his research, he discovers that language cannot do justice to his work. His descriptions of his failed efforts echo Ferber's artistic process and the narrator's writing practice in *The Emigrants*:

the more I laboured on this project over several months, the more pitiful did the results seem [...] I found writing such hard going that it often took me a whole day to compose a single sentence, and no sooner had I thought such a sentence out, with the greatest of effort, and written it down, than I saw the awkward falsity of my constructions and the inadequacy of all the words I had employed. If at times some kind of self-deception none the less made me feel that I had done a good day's work, then as soon as I glanced at the page the next morning I was sure to find the most appalling mistakes, inconsistencies and lapses staring at me from the paper. However much or little I had written, on a subsequent reading it always seemed so fundamentally flawed that I had to destroy it immediately and begin again. (*Austerlitz* 171-172)

The failures of Austerlitz's writing project are announced repeatedly in this passage. Words such as "inadequacy," "awkward falsity," "appalling mistakes, inconsistencies and lapses" and "fundamentally flawed," emphasize Austerlitz's deep distrust of language. Austerlitz's utter distrust of language recalls Michaels's misgivings as I explored them in Chapter 2. For Michaels, it is the inevitable failure of language to capture experience that causes deep mistrust on the part of the poet: "The inevitable failure of language haunts integrity"

(Michaels, "Cleopatra's Love" 178). However, as I examined in Chapter 2, Michaels suggests that language has to fail in order for it to paradoxically succeed. She argues that the writer or poet *must* signal their distrust of language in order to use it productively. However, Austerlitz's experiences of the failings of language are more melancholic than those expressed by Michaels and her characters. In a passage which recalls Wittgenstein's conceptualization of language as a city, Austerlitz explains how he feels lost in the mechanisms and design of language:

If language may be regarded as an old city full of streets and squares, nooks and crannies, [...] then I was like a man who has been abroad a long time and cannot find his way through this urban sprawl any more [...] The entire structure of language, the syntactical arrangement of parts of speech, punctuation, conjunctions, and finally even the nouns denoting ordinary objects were all enveloped in impenetrable fog. I could not even understand what I myself had written in the past – perhaps I could understand that least of all. All I could think was that such a sentence only appears to mean something, but in truth is at best a makeshift expedient, a kind of unhealthy growth issuing from our ignorance, something which we use, in the same way as many sea plants and animals use their tentacles, to grope blindly through the darkness enveloping us. (Austerlitz 174-175)⁵⁵

Sebald's reference to groping in the darkness evokes a sense of the futility of language and results in a melancholy tone. Austerlitz feels distanced from language, in much the same way that Paul Celan and Jakob Beer experience. He cannot find a language that is able to bear the weight of the history he has recently discovered. In front of Austerlitz's eyes, his writing and entire project seems to fall apart: "I could see no connections any more, the sentences resolved

⁵⁵ In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses" (§18).

themselves into a series of separate words, the words into random sets of letters, the letters into disjointed signs" (*Austerlitz* 175-176). Austerlitz's deep distrust of language, combined with his inability to write, leads him to discard his entire research project: "I gathered up all my papers, bundled or loose, my notepads and exercise books, my files and lecture notes, anything with my writing on it, and carried the entire collection out of the house to the far end of the garden, where I threw it on the compost heap and buried it under layers of rotted leaves and spadefuls of earth" (*Austerlitz* 176). Where Ferber burnt his destroyed canvases, Austerlitz buries his failed attempts: both these acts of destruction speak tangentially of the Holocaust. Ferber's burning of his canvas recalls the crematoria, whereas Austerlitz's burying of his research evokes images of mass graves.

Sebald's exploration of failure extends to a consideration of how failure registers itself as a form of destruction within the body of the writer or artist. In *Austerlitz*, for example, the narrator is cast as being burdened by a compulsion to read and write endlessly that begins to affect his eyesight. The narrator's initial response to his condition is ambivalent: he is concerned that it will hamper "[his] ability to continue working and at the same time," he feels that this bodily failure might present an escape from the burden of his work (*Austerlitz* 48). He imagines himself in "a vision of release" in which he is "free of the constant compulsion to read and write" (*Austerlitz* 48). Here, failure is expressed in the body's inability to perform the tasks required of it, a "breaking down in health" that results from "becoming exhausted or running short" as the *OED* defines it (*OED Online*). However, this is not just an instance of the artist's physical body being unable to perform a task required of it; it is an example of the eventual

wearing out of the body as a result of continual labour and effort. We see something of this in the character of Max Ferber, who eventually contracts pulmonary emphysema from the dust generated by his artistic process. The narrator describes Ferber's illness with words that register the dust and ash that constituted the hallmark of his artistic process: "He was *ashen*, and the weariness kept getting the better of him" (*The Emigrants*, 231). Ferber once remarked on the nature of artistic processes bringing about the death of the artist when he told the narrator how silver poisoning was "not uncommon among professional photographers" (*The Emigrants* 164). Ferber relates how the artist's body becomes like that of his art: "there was a photographic lab assistant in Manchester whose body had absorbed so much silver in the course of a lengthy professional life that he had become a kind of photographic plate, which was apparent in the fact [...] that the man's face and hands turned blue in strong light, or, as one might say, developed" (*The Emigrants* 165). All these instances of physical failure further the emphasis Sebald places on the position of the artist. Failure speaks to the artist's experience more than to the failings of his medium.

Austerlitz's research project portrays another element of Sebald's aesthetic of failure: it speaks of failure as a defence mechanism or an avoidance tactic. There are elements of Sisyphean labour at work in Austerlitz's endeavours, however, as his research of the architecture of the capitalist era is described as an endless project: "His investigations, so Austerlitz once told me, had long outstripped their original purpose as a project for a dissertation, proliferating in his hands into endless preliminary sketches for a study, based entirely on his

own views, of the family likenesses between all these buildings" (*Austerlitz* 44).⁵⁶

The patterns and connections Austerlitz follows in his method of study causes his project to grow and diverge in equal measure:

In the week I went daily to the Bibliothèque Nationale in the rue Richelieu, and usually remained in my place there until evening, in silent solidarity with the many others immersed in their intellectual labours, losing myself in the small print of the footnotes to the works I was reading, in the books I found mentioned in those notes, then in the footnotes to those books in their own turn, and so escaping from factual, scholarly accounts to the strangest of details, in a kind of continual regression expressed in the form of my own marginal remarks and glosses, which increasingly diverged into the most varied and impenetrable of ramifications. (*Austerlitz* 363)

While Austerlitz's research is referred to here as "labour," there is not the same tone of distress or anguish as there was in *The Emigrants*. At this point in his studies, Austerlitz is unaware of the tragedy of his past and so his research functions as an avoidance technique or "ramification". He continually defers from completing his research: "Even in Paris, said Austerlitz, I had thought of collecting my fragmentary studies in a book, although I constantly postponed writing it" (*Austerlitz* 170). Austerlitz postpones writing because he feels that his studies fall short of his own expectations: "even a first glance at the papers [...] showed that they consisted largely of sketches which now seemed misguided, distorted, and of little use" (*Austerlitz* 170-171). Austerlitz therefore expresses his deep-seated distrust of the worth of his research in similar ways to the insecurity expressed by Ferber and Sebald's narrators.

There are many inter-textual references to Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* in Sebald's descriptions of Austerlitz's research. These similarities

⁵⁶ For a discussion of Sebald's use of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances see Chapter 3, section 7, "Textual Pauses".

suggest that Austerlitz's research might be modelled on Benjamin's. Benjamin worked in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris as he collected the fragmentary parts that were to make up the unfinished *The Arcades Project*. The fact that Austerlitz works on his research in the same library furthers the similarities between these two enormous and failed pieces of work. Consider how the following description of Benjamin's work could be used to speak of Austerlitz's research: "The obsessive, detailed method that drove *The Arcades Project* resonates with the melancholy of the collector – the Sisyphean evasion of closure and embracing of the eternal incompleteness and fragmentation" (Bowring 216).⁵⁷ Not only might this passage function as a description of Austerlitz's failed research project, but it also brings the conversation back to Sisyphus and the concept of eternal incompleteness which I see as a hallmark of Sebald's aesthetic of failure. Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* is commonly referred to as a "monumental ruin" (Harvard UP online) and "its final, fragmentary and 'ruined' status has come to stand not simply as the sign of a failure of completion, but as a paradigm of a form of constitutive incompleteness that is characteristic of all systematically orientated knowledge under the conditions of modernity" (Osborne and Charles *n. pag*). These notions are inherent in Austerlitz's project: like Benjamin, he also studies the inevitable ruin of the architecture of the capitalist era: "the whole history of the architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them at the time" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 197). Austerlitz remarks, to the narrator, "somehow

⁵⁷ As I mentioned in section 2, "A Sisyphean Burden," Jacky Bowring makes this reference to Sisyphus in describing Benjamin. However, the focus of her article is on the work of Patrick Keiller and Robert Smithson. She makes one passing reference to Sebald's use of photographs, but does not connect this to Benjamin, or to Sisyphus.

we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins" (*Austerlitz* 23-24). What I would like to suggest, therefore, is that if Austerlitz's failed research project is similar to that of Walter Benjamin's, then Austerlitz's research presents a type of failure that might be considered productive in that it functions as a "monumental ruin".

Simon Ward's work on the ruin in Sebald has provided a helpful way of thinking about failure as a form of ruination in Sebald's texts. Ward proposes that the image of the ruin is central to both content and form of Sebald's work and it provides a way for understanding the "complex and subtle self-reflexive style of Sebald's work" (Ward 58). Although Ward pays specific attention to the ruin in *The Rings of Saturn* and *The Emigrants*, he does not provide much discussion of *Austerlitz* in his analysis. His suggestion that the concept of the ruin works as a metaphor for the workings of memory helps create the connection between what I see as Sebald's aesthetic of failure and the burden or weight of memory. Reading failure through the image of the ruin, which is so prolific in Sebald's landscapes, leads us to consider how failure is portrayed in the setting of Sebald's texts. I would like to suggest that this provides a way to consider Sebald's texts as set on "harried paper" like Ferber's portraits and the narrator's stories are (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 162).

Ward refers to a passage in *The Rings of Saturn* in which Michael Hamburger meditates on the fragmentary and ruined nature of memories in order to reveal the "impossibility of accessing memories" (61). Hamburger tells the narrator: "Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as these surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory

fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable" (*Rings* 177). What I would like to consider is the connection between Hamburger's description of Berlin, which follows this passage, and Ferber's artistic process: "If I now look back to Berlin, writes Michael, all I see is a darkened background with a grey smudge in it, a slate pencil drawing, some unclear numbers and letters in gothic script, blurred and half wiped away with a damp rag" (Sebald, *Rings* 177-178). The references here to smudging and wiping with a rag recall Ferber's charcoal-heavy rag with which he continually erased his failed portraits. The connection between these two passages therefore reveals that artistic acts of representation after Auschwitz, like those of memory, are laden with impossibility. For Ward these descriptions of Berlin call attention to the impossibilities of memory. He writes, "[t]hroughout the description of Berlin, the accessibility and authenticity of the act of remembrance is called into question. The past is retrievable only in fragmentary form, and can be perceived (only) through a hallucinatory state of the mind in which the mediated fragments of a ruined culture repeat themselves endlessly" (Ward 62). Ward pays careful attention to the way the narrator highlights the unreliability of memory through phrases such as "if I remember correctly" and "as I now think I remember" (*The Emigrants* 158) used as sub-clauses throughout the text (Ward 63). Phrases such as these draw attention to the failures and inaccuracies of memory: because memory is ruined, attempts to represent memories of the past must necessarily register this ruination. To put it simply, they must fail in order to succeed.

Ward's suggestion that the passages that describe Ferber's and the narrator's artistic processes in *The Emigrants* stage the ruin of artistic

representation provides a useful conceptualization of what I have described as failure. He writes:

It is more profitable to consider these models as potential descriptors of a process of literary production (and a literary product) that is consciously in search of its own analogies. That process leaves the *artistic representation* in a state of ruin, rather than the traces of a thing that was to be represented. Whereas time or some other process of destruction has ruined the material, the artist sets about destroying his signifiers in order to arrive at an approximation of the trace. (Ward 64; original emphasis)

However, Ward's discussion focuses on the dialectic between what he sees as the natural eruptions of art (as evidenced in Ferber's studio resembling a lava flow) and the simultaneous processes of destruction inherent in Sebald's art. He therefore suggests that Sebald's "self-conscious art [...] is also, in part, a natural product. And so while Sebald's texts may contain a metaphysics of the natural history of destruction [...] his response [...] is not resignation, but is to be found in the production of an art which understands itself as part of nature, but only partly, and thus able to offer resistance through its conscious process of simultaneous construction and ruination" (Ward 70). This is indeed an interesting way of reading Sebald's aesthetic of failure in light of his notion of the natural history of destruction. However, for the purposes of my exploration of Sebald's aesthetic, my focus here is more on the way Sebald's representation of the failures inherent in artistic expression speaks to questions of art after the Holocaust and finds ways in which to stage productive representations of the desires and failed attempts of the post-Holocaust artist. Ward's suggestion that the paradox in Sebald's texts occurs in that the "process of destruction becomes the aesthetic strategy of 'preserving' the signified once it has entered the realm of the textual" is worth further reflection (Ward 64). For even as Sebald's texts

stage failure and fragmentation, they still preserve these failed and fragmentary pieces and offer them to the reader. As Ward remarks, “what presents itself to the reader is a document of that simultaneous process of destruction and preservation” (Ward 64). Sebald’s texts therefore work very similarly to those of Anne Michaels, which present a text of fragments in a dialectical style similar to that of Adorno.

Sebald’s aesthetic of failure is therefore “productively barbaric,” in that its simultaneous use and self-conscious distrust of various forms of representation both unsettles and invites the reader’s response.⁵⁸ By reading about failed attempts at representation, the reader is continually reminded of the *limitations* of artistic representation and the simultaneous *necessity* of acts of representation. There are elements of passing on which occur in the midst of these portrayals of failure that demonstrate appropriate responses within the world of the text. Ferber offers his mother’s memoirs to the narrator and Austerlitz, similarly, passes on his story to the narrator after he has identified him as a willing listener. In both instances, Sebald’s narrators inherit the burden of memory as caretakers and express their response in written attempts to preserve these memories and memoirs. However, as I have shown, these attempts to write are fraught with failure and create “harried paper[s]” (*The Emigrants* 162). The fact that these failed attempts are passed on within the space of the text to the reader suggests that, despite their shortcomings, they signal the narrator’s desire to remember, preserve and pass on the memories of another. They therefore speak simultaneously of the stories they carry and of the position of their authors. As Ward puts it, Sebald’s portrayal of artistic

⁵⁸ My use of the term “productively barbaric” is described in detail in Chapter 2.

destruction within the space of the text is part of his aesthetic strategy:

“Paradoxically, a process of destruction becomes the aesthetic strategy of ‘preserving’ the signified once it has entered the realm of the textual. What presents itself to the reader is a document of that simultaneous process of destruction and preservation” (Ward 64). This simultaneous destruction and preservation is an effective dialectical strategy. It creates the tone of melancholy that is one of the hallmarks of Sebald’s oeuvre. This tone is evident in the narrator’s remarks about the elusiveness of memory he experiences after visiting Breendonk fortress:

Even now, then I try to remember [...], when I look back [...] the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think of how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 30-31)

Sebald’s melancholic project of remembering is linked with this idea of darkness: the act of memory is an attempt to pierce the darkness despite the inability or failure of memory to do so. Thus Sebald’s melancholic tone arises from his understanding that attempts at representation are inescapable and failure to adequately represent is also unavoidable. Sebald’s characters are therefore portrayed as being caught within an absurd cycle of failure. Thus, although Sebald’s texts employ strategies for passing on the weight of memory, what is passed on is an impossible weight: a burden that cannot be relieved. Even so, these attempts at representation are more meaningful than refraining from them.

4. Fragmentation and Failure

I would like to turn the discussion here to the aesthetic of fragmentation as I explored it in Anne Michaels's work in Chapter 2. Sebald's work performs a similar aesthetic of fragmentation and adds to the conceptualization of it through the unique ways his texts stage failure. While fragmentation was evoked in Michaels's work through her fragmented sentences, paragraphs and chapters, Sebald's texts present fragments through the fragmentary nature of their content (especially their random musings on various subjects). The nature of Sebald's prose, however, unlike Michaels's, is not fragmentary: the sentences are long-winded and often seem never-ending. The prose piles up and gathers more weight as it progresses. There are hardly any breaks in his texts: very few paragraph breaks and even no chapters in *Austerlitz*. Breaks in the sentences are at a minimum: a single sentence often takes up an entire page, and sometimes sentences continue for a couple of pages at a time. Sebald's prose therefore mirrors the artistic endeavours of his characters: it seems endless and offers little relief from its gathering weight.

Where Michaels's aesthetic of fragmentation focused on the inherent failures of language, Sebald's aesthetic is concerned with the challenges of the artist. He explores the failures of painting and drawing (Max Ferber), writing (Austerlitz and the narrators in both texts) and even sewing and sculpture. A brief passage in *The Rings of Saturn* describes the work done by the Ashbury daughters, who spend their days sewing only to undo what they have created: "they mostly undid what they had sewn either on the same day, the next day or the day after that" (*Rings* 212). The narrator remarks on the senselessness of this work: "[the] work they did always had about it something aimless and

meaningless and seemed not so much part of a daily routine as an expression of a deeply engrained distress" (*Rings* 211). One of the productive effects of failure is that it registers this distress. The Ashbury sisters' work reveals their deep-seated sense of inadequacy about their task. Similarly, Thomas Abram's model of the Temple of Jerusalem provides another cameo of a failed artistic attempt in *The Rings of Saturn*. Like Ferber, Abrams has been working on this model for "a good twenty years;" a task which appears to be "an apparently never ending meaningless and pointless project" (*Rings* 242; 244).

Michaels's aesthetic of fragmentation foregrounds the necessity of signalling the writer's distrust of language; she suggests that in order to use language productively, the writer needs to find ways to register its failings while employing it. We see something of this at work in Sebald's narrator's expressed mistrust in the nature of writing. I refer here to the passage quoted earlier, in which Sebald's narrator recalls his scruples when trying to record the story of Max Ferber. The narrator concludes that the "entire [...] business of writing" is "questionable" (*The Emigrants* 230). Sebald himself has spoken about these scruples in an interview with Joseph Cuomo where he suggests that the practice of writing resembles "a con trick" in that the writer "make[s] something out of nothing" (Sebald and Cuomo 108). Cuomo responds to this statement by reminding Sebald that in his works "there seems to be quite a preoccupation with making what is written true," to which Sebald replies:

That's the paradox. You have this string of lies and by this detour you arrive at a form of truth which is more precise, one hopes, than something which is strictly provable. That's the challenge. Whether it always works of course is quite another matter. And it's because of this paradoxical consolation that these scruples arise, I imagine, and

that the self-paralysis, writer's block, all these kinds of things can set in. (Sebald and Cuomo 108)

In his answer here, Sebald moves from a discussion of the inadequacies of language to consider the resultant paralyzing effect on the artist. The notion of writing creating a different kind of truth—as Sebald says here, “a form of truth which is more precise”—suggests the paradox at work in language in that it is able to conjure truth by way of fiction. “Seen from the outside, some stories have more truth than others, but the truth value of the story does not depend on its actual truth content,” Sebald told Toby Green, “The truth value depends on how it is framed and phrased. If a story is aesthetically right, then it is probably also morally right. You cannot really translate one to one from reality. If you try to do that, in order to get at a truth value through writing, you have to falsify and lie. And that is one of the moral quandaries of the whole business” (Sebald and Green).⁵⁹ However, it is precisely this power of language, and by implication, of fiction, that creates, as Sebald says, the uneasiness and misgivings on the part of the writer. For the writer knows just how fraught the process of representation is. By drawing attention to these doubts, therefore, Sebald maintains a level of self-consciousness within his texts that calls his methods continually into question.

While Michaels's protagonists reveal their attempts to register loss and destruction in wrecked forms of language, Sebald's artists' failed attempts create destruction on the page. As I discussed earlier, Ferber's failures result in destroyed canvases and “harried paper,” and the narrator's writing in a piece of

⁵⁹ Recall Michaels's discussion, which I examined in section 4 of Chapter 2, of how Rodin discovered that in order to give his sculptures a feel of movement, he had to present the body parts in seeming contradictory positions. Rodin's example leads Michaels to state that “fictive juxtapositions often seem closer to the truth” (“Cleopatra's Love” 179).

work described as “utterly botched” (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 162; 231). These “harried paper[s]”, however, present productive failures, in that they register the devastation at the core of the Holocaust. Furthermore, in creating destruction on the page, from which Ferber and the narrator must then excavate and salvage, their failed artistic representations succeed in revealing the attempts to retrieve and preserve the damaged memories and forgotten pasts which Holocaust representation calls for.

Sebald’s aesthetic of failure therefore registers the tension between the need to represent and the impossibility of doing so for the artist. A passage in *The Rings of Saturn*, in which the Vicomte de Chateaubrand attempts to write down his memoirs, displays this tension:

I spent long hours [...] commit[ing] our unhappy story to paper. As I did so, I was troubled by the question of whether in the writing I should not once again betray and lose Charlotte Ives, and this time for ever. But the fact is that writing is the only way in which I am able to cope with the memories which overwhelm me so frequently and so unexpectedly. If they remain locked away, they would become heavier and heavier as time went on, so that in the end I would succumb under their mounting weight. [...] How often this has caused me to feel that my memories, and the labours expending in writing them down are all part of the same humiliating and, at bottom, contemptible business! And yet, what would we be without memory? We would not be capable of ordering even the simplest thoughts, the most sensitive heart would lose the ability to show affection, our existence would be a mere never-ending chain of meaningless moments, and there would not be the faintest trace of a past. How wretched this life of ours is! – so full of false conceits, so futile, that it is little more than the shadow of the chimeras loosed by memory. (*Rings* 254-255)

The dialectic at work in this passage moves through the following paradoxes:

writing is a betrayal, yet writing is the only ethical response; writing is

questionable, but not to write is impossible. Writing is, the Vicomte suggests, the

only way to alleviate the burden of his memories; memories which, if not “committed” to paper, would cause him to “succumb under their mounting weight”. The Vicomte’s reference to this weight recalls Sebald’s discussion of “the weight of memory”.⁶⁰ The act of writing, as this dissertation proposes, provides strategies for not succumbing to this weight, however “dubious” or “contemptible” these strategies may seem. Writing, although questionable, is therefore presented as a strategy to stay “the weight of memory” at the same time that it is shown to be a flawed response—a failure. The Vicomte’s use of the word “chimeras” here speaks to this paradox: the impossibilities “loosed by memory” encourage acts of representation at the same time as they thwart them. This is the dialectic at work in the process of memory that informs Sebald’s melancholy aesthetic of failure. Sebald refers to writing as a “dubious business” precisely for these same reasons which his character offers here: while writing seems to be a way to cope with memories which weigh heavily upon one, at the same time, writing is a form of “betrayal” in that it ultimately is unable to measure up (*Natural History* 159).⁶¹ This passage, however, also presents a positive view of memory: “And yet, what would we be without memory?” asks the Vicomte. In answer to this notion of existence being a series of “meaningless moments,” Sebald’s literary technique, like Benjamin’s method of literary montage, counteracts this apparent meaninglessness: writing, however fragmented and seemingly disjointed, reveals how our existence is in fact a series of connected moments and memories. The juxtaposition of seemingly

⁶⁰ I discuss “the weight of memory” in the first section of the Introduction.

⁶¹ The use of the word “betrayal” recalls my discussion of imagining the other as a form of betrayal as seen in Sebald’s narrator’s feeling that he is committing “trespass” when trying to imagine Paul Bereyter and Jakob Beer’s sense of betraying or “blaspheming” Bella by trying to imagine her. See Chapter 3, section 6.

disconnected events within the space of the text, as seen in Austerlitz's photograph table, his research and in Benjamin's method, can therefore reveal their family resemblances and thus highlight their meaningful connections.⁶²

5. Writing Against the Irreversible

A reading of Sebald's essay on Jean Améry, titled "Against the Irreversible," reveals the extent to which Améry's philosophy of resistance has influenced Sebald's aesthetic of failure. Sebald's hesitations about writing follow those of Améry, as he tells us: "Because of the apostasy thus forced on him, even later Améry no longer trusted his own trade. 'The intellectual,' he writes, [...] 'always and everywhere has been totally under the sway of power. He was, and is, accustomed to doubt it intellectually, to subject it to his critical analysis – and yet in the same intellectual process to capitulate to it'" (*Natural History* 159). Améry's first hand knowledge of the corruption inherent in the systems of power causes his doubt. However, Sebald's interest in Améry lies in the fact that *despite* his awareness of the compromised position of the intellectual writer, Améry considers writing a form of resistance—albeit futile—against these powers. Améry's stance is therefore an existentialist position which recognizes and embraces absurdity. I refer here to the second passage in the epigraph for this chapter, in which Sebald expresses this absurdity as follows: "Writing, such is the résumé of a terrible apprenticeship, is a dubious business, merely more grist to the mill. And yet, considering the superior force of objectivity, it is even less defensible to refrain from writing than to go on with it, however senseless that

⁶² I discuss the references to Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances in section 7 of Chapter 3.

may seem” (*Natural History* 159). Améry’s stance therefore reveals the inherent paradox facing the writer: writing is senseless, but to refrain from writing is even “less defensible”. Similar sentiments were expressed through Sebald’s character, the Vicomte de Chateaubrand. Sebald’s aesthetic of failure takes its cue from this paradox: that it is worse to not write (and thus remain silent) than to write something senseless. The attempt to represent is what is important, even if the representation fails.

Améry finds ways to register this paradox in his use of language and his style of writing. Sebald points out that Améry was writing from the “unique position” of “the most direct experience” (*Natural History* 150; 151). His search to break the silence led him to seek a form of language through which to express the incomprehensible experiences he had undergone as a prisoner of the Nazis (Sebald, *Natural History* 151). This search therefore aligns Améry with Paul Celan, who also searched for a way to register the trauma of the Holocaust in language and find a form of language to speak in place of silence.⁶³ Like Celan, Améry’s writing, “entails the quest for a form of language in which experiences paralysing the power of articulation could be expressed” (*Natural History* 154). However, unlike Celan, Améry’s “trade”—as Sebald’s terms it—is not poetry, but rather intellectual writing. He finds this form of language he seeks in “the open method of the essay genre, where he conveyed both the damaged emotions of a man brought to the brink of death and the supremacy of a mind intent on thinking freely even in *extremis*, however useless doing so might seem” (*Natural History* 155). Améry’s writing, therefore, maintains, as Sebald describes it, “a

⁶³ I explore how Celan wrestles with language in Chapter 2, section 4: “The Effective Failures of Language.”

persuasive strategy of understatement” which is able to allude to the horrors he wishes to record without betraying them through language (*Natural History* 155). As Sebald points out, however, Améry “knows that he is operating on the borders of what language can convey,” as his voice of understatement “falter[s]” and “resorts to irony” when attempting to describe the torture he underwent in Breendonk (*Natural History* 156). Améry’s use of irony highlights the point at which understatement breaks down, or fails. In resorting to irony, Améry reveals his need for defence mechanisms at certain points where the horror of the events he attempts to remember threatens to destabilize his own memories.

Similar methods of understatement and emotionally devoid essay-style writing can be seen in Sebald’s hybrid genre. Sebald, however, is not writing from direct experience like Améry, but rather from the deferred position of the second generation. As a result, the work that his writing seeks to do is slightly different: there is no direct experience that can be betrayed, but rather an indirect experience that must be remembered. Sebald’s writing seeks to invoke loss, but from the perspective of those who come after, not those who had direct experiences of the event. I am thinking here of the conversation between Sebald and Michael Silverblatt which focuses on Sebald’s more tangential, yet ethically sensitive, writing techniques. Silverblatt points out what he sees to be the “invisible referent” at work in *Austerlitz*: “that as we go from the zoo to the train station, from the train station to the fortress, from the fortress to the jail, to the insane asylum, that the missing term is the concentration camp [...] And that always circling is this silent presence being left out but always gestured toward” (Silverblatt 79). This “silent presence” or “invisible referent” suggests a level of

understatement at work in Sebald's text, much like that which he sees at work in Améry's essays. Sebald explains:

I've always felt that it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution, of vilification of minorities, the attempt, well-nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people. And I was, in pursuing these ideas, at the same time conscious that it's practically impossible to do this; to write about concentration camps in my view is practically impossible. So you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is something on your mind but that you do not necessarily roll out, you know, on every other page. The reader needs to be prompted that the narrator has a conscience, that he is and has been perhaps for a long time engaged with these questions. And this is why the main scenes of horror are never directly addressed. I think it is sufficient to remind people, because we've all seen images, but these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things. And also paralyze, as it were, our moral capacity. So the only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation. (Sebald in Silverblatt 79-80)

Writing tangentially or obliquely works like understatement, in that what is not said, but alluded to, forms an important part of the text. The difference between Améry and Sebald's strategies lies in Sebald's perceived importance of portraying a narrator who has a conscience and who shares in the legacy of the Holocaust. Améry, having had his own direct experience, need not persuade his readers that he has these events on his mind as his writing tackles these subjects directly. Sebald is clear, however, that he believes writing about the horrors of the Holocaust is "practically impossible"; and yet, writing about them is still "necessary". What is important for Sebald, therefore, is to find a form of writing that demonstrates this inherent paradox. Martin Swales has suggested that Sebald's lack of explanation in his texts performs this type of tangential reference to the Holocaust without betraying its memory in trite or sensational prose:

A number of commentators have suggested that the only true commemoration of the horrors let loose on our world by the twentieth century history [...] above all the Holocaust, is silence, because silence acknowledges the gap left by that scale of absence, by so much dying. But silence, while it could be eloquent in this way as a conduit of loss, is also, by definition, a negation of eloquence. It could also be a token of indifference [...] Sebald's prose [...] negotiates this dilemma by using words to imply the necessity of silence, to circumscribe silence and make it eloquent. ("Intertext" 87)

Swales's reference to Sebald's texts "circumscrib[ing] silence" recalls my discussion of Anne Michaels's assertion that it is only in circling around the invisible that the poet or writer can gesture at it. Michaels proposed that even though such gestures fail to capture the invisible, they still work as a sign of the attempt.⁶⁴ As Swales puts it, Sebald "gives us the circumstances: the sayable things that surround the centre of pain, the material traces of the psychological condition of blight, deprivation and hurt [...] he gives us the rings caused by destruction and deprivation, rather than the haemorrhaging centre" ("Intertext" 86). Michaels and Sebald therefore both approach questions of Holocaust representation tangentially, with strategies that speak more of the attempt to represent than actual representation of the horrors of the Holocaust. However, while Michaels's poetic metaphors are often quite shocking, Sebald's understated prose is not dependant on the lyrical, but rather alludes to the Holocaust through describing the devastation left in its wake in measured terms.

According to Sebald, Améry's philosophy is one of resistance despite the very real limitations and failures of such resistance. Sebald writes:

One of the most impressive aspects of Améry's stance as a writer is that although he knew the real limits of the power to resist as few

⁶⁴ Chapter 2, section 4.

others did, he maintains the validity of resistance even to the point of absurdity. Resistance without any confidence that it will be effective, resistance *quand même*, out of a principle of solidarity with victims and as a deliberate affront to those who simply let the stream of history sweep them along, is the essence of Améry's philosophy (Sebald, *Natural History*, 159-160; original emphasis).⁶⁵

Améry's writing of resistance is, Sebald remarks, "intentionally associated with French existentialism" in that it "exemplifies the necessity of continuing to protest" (*Natural History* 160). Améry's writing is therefore motivated by resentment, as Sebald explains, which fuels his notion of writing as resistance: "Resentment, writes Améry, in full awareness of the illogicality of his attempt at definition, 'nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone'" (*Natural History* 160). We see something of this desire to undo the "irreversible" in *Austerlitz* when Austerlitz is faced with a picture of himself as a page boy, which I discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Austerlitz explains this call to the irreversible as a "challenge [to] avert the misfortune lying ahead of him" (*Austerlitz* 260). That the "misfortune lying ahead" of the page boy has already come to pass, however, does not detract from the sense of responsibility engendered in Austerlitz upon viewing this photograph. The page boy is, in some senses, like the victims for whom Améry writes in solidarity. Their lives cannot be reclaimed, neither can the page boy's, *and yet* writing in solidarity with them—writing which attempts to undo what has been done—is still, according to Améry, the appropriate response. Sebald takes his cue from Améry's approach to writing: even though he is fully aware of the absurdity of it—which is

⁶⁵ Loosely translated, *quand même* means 'still', 'nevertheless', 'even though' or 'regardless'.

expressed as the limits of resistance—Améry cannot *but* resist. Améry's absurd protests constitute an ethical response. Although Améry knows that his protests and acts of resistance are futile, this is not necessarily what is at stake, as Sebald points out. Rather, the aim of Améry's writing is "not to resolve but to *reveal* the conflict" (*Natural History* 162; emphasis mine), and it is in this sense that I suggest Sebald's aesthetic of failure functions. While not speaking of Sebald's aesthetic of failure, Swales makes a similar suggestion about the effective nature of Sebald's texts. "The past cannot be laid to rest," Swales writes:

neither psychologically nor socially nor politically nor aesthetically nor ethically; the legacy of European civilization, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, is also the legacy of barbarism. The narrative act, then, serves neither to soothe nor to assuage; it does not make things better. But it does make these (material and mental) things knowable. And somehow, in Sebald's hands, that seems achievement enough. ("Theoretical" 28)

Sebald is interested in a writing that *reveals*, or as Swales says makes "knowable," the artist's desire to represent. As a result, through presenting the failed attempts of the post-Holocaust artist, Sebald's texts reveal the complexities and impossibilities of artistic endeavours at the same time that they make visible the efforts and desire of the artist's position. In this way his texts work in solidarity with the victims of the past and continue to encourage the witnesses of the future.

6. An Absurd Hope

Sebald's essay on Améry invites an existentialist consideration of the position of his artists' perpetual failure. I consider Albert Camus's existentialist reading of Sisyphus's predicament in *The Myth of Sisyphus* by way of conclusion. Camus's

reading of Sisyphus as the quintessential “absurd hero,” who is “happy” despite the cycle of failure he is doomed to be in (108, 111). Camus’s reading hinges on a similar existentialist notion of “resistance *quand même*,” as Améry puts it: it pivots on the necessity of consciousness and scorn. “If this myth is tragic,” writes Camus, “that is because the hero is conscious [...] Sisyphus, [...] powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn” (Camus 109). For Camus, it is Sisyphus’s conscious acknowledgement of his endless and impossible burden that allows him to rise above it at the same time that he is employed in it. As the absurd hero, he is caught in a cycle of failure and yet is able to acknowledge its absurdity. Camus writes:

If the descent is sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. [...] When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man’s heart: this is the rock’s victory, this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. [...] But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. (109)

For Camus, Sisyphus is able to embrace absurdity; this does not, however, release him from his burden, but rather commits him to continue with his task: “The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing” (Camus 110). Camus’s portrayal of Sisyphus as able to maintain the tension between acknowledging the absurdity of his endless punishment, while joyfully accepting its ceaseless demands, epitomises his understanding of the joy to be found in embracing the absurd: “According to Camus, there is a happiness, a joy, and a

repose in living with the consciousness of the absurd" (Oaklander 341).

Consciousness is what this absurd hope hinges on.

I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter that despite Sebald's reputation as a melancholic writer, his texts present fleeting glimpses of hope even as they portray cycles of endless failure. For it is the very nature of Sebald's artists' continual failed attempts that speak, paradoxically, of the anticipation of success. Each renewed effort, each repeated action, reveals the potential hope that the artist's tireless labours might finally achieve their purpose. The moment an artistic gesture is measured as having "failed," it reveals the standard of success by which it is measured. It therefore speaks of its own contingency: the artwork could have been different; better still, it might be different next time. This is the hope that is sustained in the midst of ceaseless attempts. Failure is not entirely without reference to success and therefore Sebald's portrayal of failed artistic attempts alludes to the possibility of hope in the same way that the harried papers of his artists' speak of their tireless commitment to representation as an act of solidarity with the victims, "however senseless that might seem" (Sebald, *Natural History* 159).

In the following chapter I shift my focus to consider a productive counter-text to the ones I have examined thus far. Schlink's novel considers a different type of failure: it examines the failure of the second generation witness to address the memory of perpetration. The failure of the witness creates a layered authorial voice, which functions differently to the dialogic layering of voices in that the protagonist's voice is layered, or rather haunted, by its own silences.

Chapter 5: An Alternative Weight: The Memory of Perpetration in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*

*Years later I reread it and discovered that it is the book that creates distance. It does not invite one to identify with it and makes no one sympathetic, neither the mother nor the daughter, nor those who shared their fate in various camps and finally in Auschwitz and the satellite camp near Cracow. It never gives the barracks leaders, the female guards, or the uniformed security force clear enough faces or shapes for the reader to be able to relate to them, to judge their acts for better or worse. It exudes the very numbness I have tried to describe before [...] Hanna is neither named in the book, nor is she recognizable or identifiable in any way. (Schlink, *The Reader* 118-119)*

1. Introduction

Although Bernhard Schlink's novel, *The Reader*, has been met with substantial popular acclaim, within the critical sphere it has generated an equal measure of evaluative judgement and condemnation which takes issue with the morality of the narrative.⁶⁶ This polarized response is the result of the highly sensitive subject matter of Schlink's novel: he paints an emotive portrait of Hanna Schmitz, a Holocaust concentration camp guard, through the eyes of Michael Berg, a second generation German protagonist, who is romantically involved with her. Schlink's novel's subject matter is contentious for a number of reasons: his choice to portray an SS guard as illiterate has been critiqued, not only because it is considered an atypical portrayal, but also because many critics feel that Hanna's illiteracy exculpates her.⁶⁷ Cynthia Ozick remarks, for example, "the plot of Schlink's novel turns not on the literacy that was overwhelmingly typical of Germany, but rather on an anomalous case of illiteracy, which the novel itself recognizes as freakish" (Ozick 15). Furthermore, critics have expressed unease

⁶⁶ As I mentioned in section 3 of the Introduction, *The Reader* has been especially popular in the English-speaking world (it has sold over two million copies in the US alone). Oprah Winfrey featured *The Reader* in Oprah's book club and the text was adapted for a successful film (Kate Winslet won an Oscar for best actress, as well as numerous other awards).

⁶⁷ Critics who are uncomfortable about Schlink's use of illiteracy include Donahue, Ozick, Hoffman, Bartov, Swales and Niven.

about the erotic element of the novel. Ozick has suggested that Schlink portrays “Nazi porn” (Ozick 14), while William Collins Donahue has suggested that Schlink’s use of the erotic functions as a distraction which “sugar coat[s]” the moral issues he sees in the novel: “By appealing to the erotic, Schlink invokes universal categories of human attraction and bonding that appear to require no explanation whatsoever” (Donahue “Illusions” 64).⁶⁸ Donahue has been especially critical of Schlink’s “illusions of subtlety” as he argues that Schlink’s narrative style presents questions as a “*veneer* of critique” without ever providing answers. Donahue therefore argues that the novel keeps debates about morality and criminality abstract (“Illusions” 65). Those who read the novel as an allegory of the second generation predicament take issue with both of the points outlined above, as well as the fact that the romantic connection between Hanna and Michael is inherently different to the relationship between parents and children and therefore does not hold allegorically.⁶⁹ This difference pivots on the element of choice: Michael chooses to engage in a relationship with Hanna, whereas children do not choose their parents. However, David Dwan has rightly pointed out that for Michael, the issue hinges not so much on familial love but on the choice of empathy: “[a]ccording to Michael, we are morally accountable for our decision to empathise precisely because empathy is always a decision” (96). Furthermore, Dwan writes that “[t]hroughout the book [...] Michael, particularly in his attitude to his own father, seems to deny the innocence of even the love of our parents” (96). Furthermore, a significant amount of critical literature on *The Reader* approaches the novel from a legal

⁶⁸ Some critics have proposed that Michael and Hanna’s relationship be read as an Oedipal relationship, considering the many references to classical literature in the novel and the overarching fatalistic tone Michael adopts. See Alison (164) and Mahlendorf (465).

⁶⁹ Critics who read *The Reader* as an allegory include Alison, Dwan and Stern.

perspective. Daniel Stern's article, for example, outlines the debates which have ensued over whether Schlink encourages the reader to condone or sympathise with Hanna and with Michael. Thus, Schlink's narrative choices in *The Reader* appear to touch on a nerve of Holocaust studies.

In Chapter 3, I considered how Sebald's deliberate play with fact and fiction registered a similar sense of discomfort in his readers who are acutely aware of what is at stake after controversies such as that of Wilkormirski's *Fragments*. Ozick's discussion of *The Reader* in "The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination," provides an illuminating examination of the issues at stake in writing fiction about traumatic historical events such as the Holocaust. She argues that, by definition, "a work of fiction [...] cannot betray history" (15). However, she shows that when it comes to histories like the Holocaust, there is more personal and historical weight at stake. Ozick explores three examples of this type of "fraud" in relation to Holocaust literature: Helen Demidenko's *The Hand that Signed the Papers*, Salomon Isacovici and Juan Manuel Rodriguez's *Man of Ashes* and Benjamin Wilkormirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*. Ozick's main critique is that these novels deflect from "the real nature of the Holocaust" (17): "Auschwitz represents the end not simply of Jewish society and culture, but of the European Jewish soul. Then how is it possible for a writer to set forth as a purposeful embodiment of Auschwitz anything other than the incised, the historically undisputed, principle and incarnation of the Final Solution?" (17). Ozick argues that Schlink "deflects from the epitome" in a way that "corrupt[s]" history (18). Daniel Reynolds, however, has pointed out that while these debates register the tension between "fictional representation and historical reference" which is, he suggests, a central theme in the novel, that

“they do not acknowledge the ways in which the novel itself foregrounds—indeed, creates—these tensions in order to invite reflection on them” (238). Reynolds reads *The Reader* as a “case of metafiction,” which “calls attention to its own textuality by constantly referring to the acts of reading and writing” (239). Reynolds therefore presents one of the most careful readings of the text, which considers the criticisms levelled against Schlink’s novel, but argues that fictional texts have the right to stage such complexities in order to provoke reflection in their readers (255). My reading of *The Reader* follows a similar line to Reynolds, in that, for the purposes of this chapter, I bracket the questions of morality and legal justice in the novel and focus rather on the effect of such a text on its reader. Furthermore, in considering Schlink’s text in conversation with the other main texts in this dissertation, my main enquiry concerns its function as a counter-text.

It is Schlink’s consideration of the predicament of the second generation of Germans which positions his novel as a helpful counter-text to the others I have examined in this thesis.⁷⁰ By “counter-text” I mean that the novel calls into question some of the notions about the role of the second generation witness which I have explored in my other texts thus far. While Michaels and Sebald explore the ethics and aesthetics of literary modes of remembering those who were the victims of the Holocaust, Schlink’s novel considers the ethical dynamics

⁷⁰ As I discussed in section 3 of the Introduction, I am aware that my use of the designation “Germans” here is potentially misleading, as those who fall into this category could well be Jewish Germans. Jews formed an integral part of German society and so to create a distinction between Jewish-Victim and German-perpetrator is to over-simplify the categories. However, to speak of the “second generation of perpetrators” is also an over-simplification, as not all Germans were active agents of perpetration during the Nazi regime. Cynthia Ozick speaks of the “children of those who were responsible for the Nazi regime,” which seems to express the nuances a little more clearly, and yet it still maintains that all were responsible (14). I therefore simply speak of the “second generation” throughout the rest of this chapter in order to speak of the children of Germans who were part of the Nazi regime (whether perpetrators or bystanders). At times, however, I do refer to the second generation of Germans, where more of a distinction is needed.

at stake *for the witness* in remembering perpetrators. Thus *The Reader* interrogates the position of the second generation witness and complicates the relation between reading and bearing witness. The weight of the memory of perpetration is a very different kind of burden to inherit. It is not the burden of the loss of the dead and the guilt of survival, but rather the tension created by living alongside the perpetrators and being a part of a society which continues to allow them to move freely in its midst. Schlink has explored the German sense of guilt about the past in a series of lectures titled *Guilt About the Past*. In introducing his topic, Schlink speaks of inherited and collective guilt as a specifically German burden: “After the Third Reich, the burden of guilt about the past became a German experience and a topic of German cultural life and remains so today” (*Guilt* 1). He defines the transference of guilt from one generation to the next on the basis of solidarity, which he describes as follows: “It is not the idea of responsibility for someone else’s crime, but of responsibility for one’s own solidarity with the criminal” (*Guilt* 12). The resultant guilt—guilt associated with loving the perpetrators and with keeping their secrets—is an inherited guilt based more on collective guilt than on strict transference within the family sphere. Responsibility for the other as a result of solidarity is a point of connection between the second generation on both “sides” of the victim-perpetrator divide. Solidarity, as I examined in the previous chapter, was a key factor motivating Améry’s conception of the responsibility of the writer—a factor which in turn informs Sebald’s aesthetic. Schlink has suggested that the second generation burden of guilt results from keeping the secrets of perpetration hidden (or simply being a part of a society which keeps them hidden). Schlink’s novel addresses the failures of the second generation to

address the past of the perpetrators. *The Reader* focuses more on the position of the teller than the other texts in this study, and in doing so, it questions the very act of witnessing on behalf of another when that other is a perpetrator. Michael's voice creates its own layering, as it simultaneously reveals certain aspects of his and Hanna's story and conceals others. Michael's voice also continuously questions his situation and yet he never resolves these questions. His continual questioning signals his distrust in his own ability to witness.

As a counter-text, *The Reader* performs a different kind of passing on to that which I have explored in Michaels and Sebald's work. In fact, I will analyse how the text does not attempt to pass on the weight of memory with the same sense of urgency in the sense that Michaels and Sebald's texts do. Like Michaels and Sebald's texts, *The Reader* positions us as listeners—but as listeners of a confession rather than of a testimony that seeks to be retold. As I have argued, Michaels's and Sebald's texts present models of the witnessing process within the structures of their texts, thus offering a model of response at the same time as they set up the terms of response between the texts and their readers. Schlink's novel, I will argue, performs a different kind of response that does not necessarily work as a model for the reader.

One of the main concerns of Schlink's protagonist is to create a detailed portrait of Hanna, ostensibly in response to the absence of one he detects in "the daughter['s]" testimony (Schlink, *The Reader* 106). However, as my analysis will show, even as he attempts to "reconstruct" Hanna, as John MacKinnon has said it, Michael is not able to synthesize his memories of Hanna with his knowledge of her as a concentration camp guard (MacKinnon 182). Michael therefore resorts to only telling of the Hanna he knew before he found out about her crimes and

his narrative makes it increasingly obvious that he is not able to reconcile these two seemingly disparate women. Michael succeeds in portraying Hanna, but not as a perpetrator. His inability to combine the two aspects of Hanna reveals the crux of the tension facing the second generation: the tension between knowing and loving people who have committed or been complicit in perpetrating atrocities.

2. A Counter-text

While I have already suggested that Schlink's novel functions as a counter-text for the other works I examine in this thesis, I wish to examine how the function of a counter-text informs part of Michael's narrative strategy in *The Reader*. Like the author-protagonists in the other main texts examined in this thesis, Michael Berg writes his story in response to another text: the book written by the nameless Jewish victim, who is referred to as "the daughter" (*The Reader* 106). We only learn about this book in the second part of the novel, in which the daughter's testimony is the primary evidence used against Hanna and her co-defendants in the trial. However, Michael's interactions with the daughter's testimony presents a different model of response to those I explored in Anne Michaels and W. G. Sebald's texts. As I have explored in my chapters so far, both Anne Michaels and Sebald's protagonists engage with these other texts dialogically through including extracts from them within their narratives. Ben includes Jakob's memoirs in the first part of *Fugitive Pieces* and responds to them in the second part, which also includes extracts from them (signalled by italicization). Similarly, Sebald's narrator includes whole passages from memoirs (those of Ferber's mother, for example) and reports of the oral memories of

others within his narratives. Sebald's texts also include reproductions of the photographs the narrator has received from other characters. These are all instances of what Susan Gubar has called "proxy-witnessing" as they "collec[t] and circulat[e] events recollected by eye-witnesses" (Gubar, *Poetry* 166). Michael's narrative, however, does not include a sustained engagement with the daughter's testimony; nor does it circulate the original text to any extent. It therefore departs from the position of the proxy-witness and presents a different form of response which is more intent on "redressing [...] wrong" than engaging in dialogue with the daughter's text or passing it on (Alison 177).

Michael's initial impression of the daughter's book is that it has a distancing effect. At first he presumes that this is because he has to read the book in a foreign language: "I had to read the book in English, an unfamiliar and laborious exercise [...] the alien language, unmastered and struggled over, created a strange concatenation of distance and immediacy. I worked through the book with particular thoroughness and yet [...] it remained as alien as the language itself" (*The Reader* 118). Michael believes it is the process of pulling apart unfamiliar words, translating them and then reconnecting them, that does not allow him to relate to or empathise with the story he is reading. Later, however, he recognizes that it is not the foreignness of the language that is alienating, or the process of translation, but the tone of the book itself. I refer here to the epigraph for this chapter:

Years later I reread it and discovered that it is the book that creates distance. It does not invite one to identify with it and makes no one sympathetic, neither the mother nor the daughter, nor those who shared their fate in various camps and finally in Auschwitz and the satellite camp near Cracow. It never gives the barracks leaders, the female guards, or the uniformed security

force clear enough faces or shapes for the reader to be able to relate to them, to judge their acts for better or worse. It exudes the very numbness I have tried to describe before. [...] Hanna is neither named in the book, nor is she recognizable or identifiable in any way. (*The Reader* 118-119)

The tone of the book, Michael suggests, asks neither for sympathy nor creates any terms by which identification might occur—it extends its “numbness” towards perpetrators and victims alike.

Michael’s reading of the daughter’s testimony highlights his specific second generation subject position. As someone who has a personal relationship with a camp guard, he reads the daughter’s text with a specific awareness of the perpetrators as fellow humans (rather than abstract evildoers). He reads looking for Hanna, and when he does not find her in the book, he reflects on how she is not given the space he expects in the text: “Hanna is neither named in the book, nor is she recognizable or identifiable in any way” (*The Reader* 119).

Furthermore, as someone who feels the weight of inherited guilt, or what Schlink terms the “guilt of non-repudiation,” Michael also displays acute sensitivity to the way in which, through not describing or naming the camp guards, the daughter’s testimony prevents any empathy for or connection to them (*Guilt* 19).⁷¹ Michael feels that this lack of description results in the reader not being allowed to make her own judgements about the camp guards. For Michael, it seems as if a reader who relates to or empathises with any of the perpetrators is not conceivable for the writer. Yet such a reader is a reality for Michael: he is intimately involved with one of the defendants and displays considerable empathy for her. The distancing devices that Michael detects in the daughter’s

⁷¹ Schlink uses this term in his essay titled “Collective Guilt” to describe the kind of guilt incurred by maintaining solidarity with criminals.

book, combined with the lack of identifiable form he feels is given to any of the perpetrators, provokes him to write his narrative.

Although he does not explicitly say that the daughter's book incites his written response, Michael's suggestion that there is a lack of space given to the perpetrators in the daughter's testimony, when read with an awareness of the effort taken to do just this in his own testimony, reveals his motives. By making this argument, I am following critics such as John MacKinnon and Jane Alison who state that Michael's reasons for writing about Hanna reveal an effort to compensate for her absence in the daughter's narrative. Both MacKinnon and Alison refer to the same passage that I have used as the epigraph to make their claims (*The Reader* 119). MacKinnon's argument, however, has more of a legal focus than mine. He reads Michael's written response as an attempt to offer justice for Hanna and so balance the legal system:

Michael's aim in telling Hanna's story is to 'reconstruct' her face, to give her back her identity and acknowledge the irreducible particularity of her character and circumstance. Justice requires empathy, he implies, inviting identification with, rather than enforcing a distance from, those whom we would judge. Accordingly, the law's ready recourse to the abstract and general only increases the likelihood of our treating individuals unjustly. (182-183)

Although MacKinnon and my emphases differ slightly, his term "reconstruct" provides a useful way of considering Michael's writing project. Alison reads the novel as an allegory in which the Jewish victim functions as Hanna's counterpart: she is literate and published, while Hanna is illiterate; the daughter speaks freely, is translated and widely distributed, while Hanna is not asked to speak during her trial (169). Alison argues Schlink's text "sacrifices the victim" by withholding tragic status from the daughter and bestowing it on Hanna instead (177). As very

little space is given to detailing the daughter in the novel and she is unfavourably compared to Hanna, Alison feels, like Ozick, that Schlink's text presents an unfair portrayal of a true victim of the Holocaust. Indeed, Schlink's novel does not conform to the usual patterns and accepted "rules" of Holocaust fiction, which is why it has generated such a critical response. Alison argues that the characterization of the Jewish victim in the novel "forms a subtext with disturbing consequences for how the book's celebrated moral ambiguities should be read" as

the text seems rather to withhold tragic status—in the literary sense—from this unindividuated victim. Tragedy requires singularity. Schlink has chosen a perpetrator to play the tragic role; his text will sing of her so that she will not be buried beneath all the Holocaust iconography. The daughter's book 'never gives the barracks leaders, the female guards, or the uniformed security force clear enough faces or shapes for the reader to be able to relate to them' (Schlink, *Reader* 118); Schlink's book seems intent on redressing this wrong. To do this, he sacrifices the victim. (Alison 165; 176-177)

Alison makes an important point when she highlights the lack of a "face" and a "shape" that are afforded to the daughter in Michael's testimony. She therefore reveals that in his attempts to "redress" the "wrong[s]" committed against Hanna, Michael commits the very same actions which he is reacting to. Alison's argument does, however, rely on a reading of the novel as an allegory, which is why the space afforded (or not afforded) to the Jewish daughter appears to be of such importance in the text. If one considers that Schlink's purpose in this novel is not to detail the situation of the second generation in their *entirety*, (as would be expected of an allegory), but rather to tell one singular story, then the moral weight placed on the text would indeed be lighter.

However, even Michael's discussion of the distancing tone of the text casts its own shadow of doubt. After asserting that the female guards are never named or described in depth, Michael then reveals that the daughter's description of one guard causes him to wonder if she is speaking about Hanna. He admits, "[s]ometimes I thought I recognized her in one of the guards, who was described as young, pretty, and conscientiously unscrupulous in the fulfilment of her duties, but I wasn't sure. When I considered the other defendants, only Hanna could be the guard described" (*The Reader* 119). Michael's statements here allow us to glimpse the daughter's descriptions of the guards. He later even mentions that a camp guard was called "Mare," thus revealing that at least some of the guards were named and described in her narrative (*The Reader* 119). This calls his statements about the lack of description in the daughter's testimony into question and leads the reader to consider that it is quite possible that there is description provided in the daughter's testimony, albeit not at the level which Michael would desire.

Michael's awareness of Hanna's absence in the daughter's text therefore sheds light on the desires, sensitivities and tensions of the second generation of Germans. In "redressing [a] wrong" (Alison 177), his story displays the predicament he is caught in by loving a member the older generation while acknowledging her guilt. Michael's response to the daughter's book, however, does not engage in sustained conversation with her text, but rather seeks to remedy its shortcomings. All that is included of the daughter's text is a series of incidents from it that are relayed over the course of a mere five pages of the novel (*The Reader* 118-123). With the exception of one quotation, the entirety of the daughter's story is relayed in summary form (*The Reader* 120-121). Michael

focuses on the incident of the burning church and the march that led up to it. But we know, from his brief discussion of the lack of detail provided for camp guards, that there is more to the daughter's testimony than these incidents. While Sebald's narrator allows the voices of other testimonies to be included in his narrative, often expressly quoting others, Michael only quotes the daughter once: "'Death march?' asks the daughter in the book, and answers, 'No, death trot, death gallop'" (*The Reader* 120-121). Thus, although there is another text within this narrative (or a voice which it responds to, if we follow the fugal principle performed in *Fugitive Pieces*), it remains, for the most part, a silenced voice. Michael writes to provide a counterbalance to the daughter's text, but not to engage in dialogue with it as a "proxy-witness" might do.

3. Haunted Memories

In an effort to "reconstruct" Hanna (to borrow MacKinnon's word (182)), Michael's testimony creates an extended portrait of her. Throughout the text, Michael describes pictures of Hanna he has retained in his memory, which are meant to form the primary "face" or impression of Hanna that he presents to us. These mental photographs act as a form of textual refrain throughout part one of the novel; as his narrative progresses, Michael explicitly signals which scenes will become images added to this mental portrait collection. For example, his image of Hanna in the nightgown functions as one of his pictures:

It was aubergine-colored with narrow straps that left her shoulders and arms bare, and came down to her ankles. It shone and shimmered. Hanna was delighted; she laughed and beamed. She looked down at herself, turned around, danced a few steps, looked at herself in the mirror, checked her reflection, and danced

some more. *That too is a picture of Hanna that has stayed with me.*
(*The Reader* 64; emphasis mine)

The emphasis in this passage on Hanna's physicality—her “shoulders,” “arms” and “ankles”—together with a focus on her emotions of delight, and her laughter and smiles, serve Michael's purpose of “reconstruct[ing]” Hanna. Furthermore, the sentence at the end of this passage signals the inclusion of this image in Michael's mental collection. There is a similar refrain in the following extract, where Michael describes his last glimpse of Hanna before she vanishes from his hometown and their romantic relationship ends:

She was standing twenty or thirty meters away, in shorts and an open blouse knotted at the waist, looking at me [...] Hanna in shorts, with the tails of her blouse knotted, her face turned towards me but with an expression I cannot read at all—*that is another picture I have of her.* (*The Reader* 80; emphasis mine)

Directly after he relays this moment, Michael repeats his description of it, as if it has just been captured in photographic form and he is reviewing the print. The immediate repetition of the image in the text solidifies it as a mental impression of Hanna, just as taking a photograph freezes the moment in time. The instance of repetition, however, also carries some uneasy undertones, which hint at traumatic recall and even possible flashback.

Michael's descriptions of his “pictures” therefore work as a form of textual repetition and as a sign of traumatic haunting. Anne Whitehead identifies repetition as “one of the key literary strategies in trauma fiction” as it “mimic[s] the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression” (*Trauma Fiction* 86). However, Michael's mental photographs of Hanna work in a curiously different way to the repeated flashbacks or haunting of a traumatic episode as his images

of Hanna are from *before* he has knowledge of her Nazi past and therefore are not images that are traumatic in nature. Where traumatic repetition and flashbacks usually occur as a person's psyche attempts to make sense of a traumatic event after its occurrence, Michael's somewhat compulsive repetition of his pictures of Hanna constitutes an attempt to preserve them from being transformed or tainted by his more recent knowledge of her past.

The first time Michael repeats his description of one of his portraits of Hanna, he reflects on the role the pictures play in his memories of her before he repeats the image. The structure of the following passage demonstrates his progression from presenting an image (Hanna in his father's study) to reflecting on how it functions in his memory, to including it as part of a series of repeated images:

I leaned quietly against the doorpost and watched her. She let her eyes drift over the bookshelves that filled the walls, as if she were reading a text. Then she went to a shelf, raised her right index finger chest high and ran it slowly along the backs of the books, moved to the next shelf, ran her finger further along, from one spine to the next, pacing off the whole room. She stopped at the window, looked out into the darkness, at the reflection of the bookshelves, and at her own.

It is one of the pictures of Hanna that has stayed with me. I have them stored away, I can project them on a mental screen and watch them, unchanged, unconsumed. There are long periods when I don't think about them at all. But they always come back into my head, and then I sometimes have to run them repeatedly through my mental projector and watch them. One is Hanna putting on her stockings in the kitchen. Another is Hanna standing in front of the tub holding the towel in her outstretched arms. Another is Hanna riding her bike with her skirt blowing in her slipstream. Then there is the picture of Hanna in my father's study. She's wearing a blue-and-white striped dress, what they called a shirtwaist back then. She looks young in it. She has run her finger along the backs of the books and looked into the darkness of the window. She turns to me, quickly enough that the skirt swings out around her

legs for a moment before it hangs smooth again. Her eyes are tired.
(*The Reader* 62–63; emphasis mine)

As Michael reflects on these images, he uses words that speak of them as if they were photographs or slides, able to be recalled and projected on a “mental screen” or through a “mental projector” at whim. There is an element of control evident in the way he explains his ability to recall these images of Hanna when he so desires. The passage also hints at Michael’s impulse to preserve these impressions of her, as he remarks that he has them “stored away [...] unchanged, unconsumed.” These images function as Michael’s memories of their relationship before it was shadowed by the knowledge of Hanna’s complicity. Collectively, therefore, these images form the “portrait” that Michael presents to us through the text.

The repetition of these pictures of Hanna, however, is not always within Michael’s control. There is the suggestion of traumatic repetition or haunting in the above passage when Michael admits that, “they *always* come back into my head” (*The Reader* 62; emphasis mine). Furthermore, his subtle admission that sometimes he *has* “to run them repeatedly [...] and watch them” reveals the involuntary recall of these images (*The Reader* 62). These instances of repetition reveal Michael’s desire to master his positive memories of Hanna retrospectively, in order to protect them—“unchanged, unconsumed”—against the knowledge of her he learns during the trial. Alternatively, they could point towards his retrospective desire to find traces of her Nazi past in his memories, although this impulse, if operating, would be on a strictly subconscious level.

Although Michael appears to attempt to separate and preserve his images of Hanna before her trial from those after, there are instances of foreshadowing

at work in these mental pictures that suggest retrospective haunting. There is a suggestion of Hanna-the-prisoner in this first memory of Hanna in the study. The “blue-and-white striped dress” Hanna is wearing prefigures the “light blue dress” she is wearing when Michael visits her in prison (*The Reader* 62; 195).

Furthermore, in this image from the study, Hanna runs her fingers across books that she cannot read, while in the image of her in prison she holds a book in her hands, but does not read it. In both images Hanna’s face and eyes are described as “tired” and “weary” (*The Reader* 62; 196). Hanna’s “tired” eyes are the one constant feature in Michael’s images of her from the past, his description of her during the trial, and his memory of her during their one brief visit in prison. However, in a book in which questions play an integral role in the narrative, Michael never questions or lingers over why Hanna’s eyes might be weary. To the reader, Hanna’s weary eyes speak to us of her past—of things she has seen and done which she cannot escape from—of tiredness with life and even possibly despondency. However, Michael’s refusal to engage with this sign of Hanna’s past signals his avoidance of seeing traces of Hanna-as-perpetrator in the woman he knows intimately.

Michael’s collection of memories or mental images repeats itself at different intervals throughout the text. The images relayed in part one are repeated in part two, where they collide with Michael’s attempts to imagine Hanna as a perpetrator, and again in part three when they are joined with his final picture of her as an old woman on the bench in the prison courtyard. Their repetition across the different parts of the text works as an image of traumatic memory and as a textual device which mimics traumatic haunting.

4. Who is Betrayed?

Michael's memories of Hanna become threatened as he begins to try to work through his new knowledge of her as a perpetrator with his intimate experiences of her as a lover. By way of response, he attempts to imagine Hanna in the situations that were described in the daughter's testimony:

I saw Hanna by the burning church, hard-faced, in a black uniform, with a riding whip. She drew circles in the snow with her whip, and slapped it against her boots. I saw her being read to. She listened carefully, asked no questions, and made no comments. When the hour was over, she told the reader she would be going on the transport to Auschwitz next morning. The reader, a frail creature with a stubble of black hair and nearsighted eyes, began to cry. Hanna hit the wall with her hand and two women, also prisoners in striped clothing, came in and pulled the reader away. I saw Hanna walking the paths in the camp, going into the prisoners' barracks and overseeing construction work. She did it all with the same hard face, cold eyes, and pursed mouth [...] Sometimes there were many prisoners gathered together or running from one place to the other or standing in line or marching, and Hanna stood among them and screamed orders, her screaming face a mask of ugliness, and helped things along with her whip. (*The Reader* 145-146)

Michael's imaginings here rely on clichés in order to create mental pictures of the perpetrators and the victims. His references to "striped clothing," "stubble [...] black hair" and human "frail[ty]" in the prisoners are all recognized Holocaust images commonly used by those who were not involved to attempt to imagine the event. Similarly, Michael's descriptions of Hanna as "hard-faced," with "cold eyes" and a "pursed mouth" rely on clichéd images of perpetrators. Descriptions such as these expose the perceived lack of emotion and empathy for the other inherent in the idea of "the perpetrator" who must be cold-hearted and

emotionally hardened in order to commit crimes against others.⁷² This notion of emotional rigidity is portrayed in Hanna's imagined cold disposal of those who read to her. In Michael's imagination, she does not interact with her readers and displays no feeling when they cry in front of her. The actions Michael envisions Hanna performing also rely on clichéd ideas of evil: they are menacing and violent. She plays with her whip, ominously drawing "circles in the snow" with it and violently "slap[ping]" her boots with it. Her other imagined actions are also violent and uncontrolled: she "hit[s] the wall with her hand" and "scream[s] orders" (*The Reader* 146). Later, Hanna is described as "help[ing] things along with her whip" (*The Reader* 146)—a euphemism which avoids actually speaking of her whipping the prisoners under her charge. Michael's use of euphemism recalls Anne Michaels's discussion of the device in her essays, which I explored in Chapter 2. Anne Michaels looks specifically at how euphemism was employed to speak of and motivate Nazi acts of atrocity.⁷³ We see something of this at work in Michael Berg's employment euphemism to cover up Hanna's crimes even as he attempts to imagine them. His use of euphemism therefore hints at his solidarity and potential complicity in keeping the acts of the perpetrators hidden.

Michael's continual reference to Hanna's imaginary whip sexualizes his mental picture of her. Her whip signals her capacity for brutality, which is something Michael was subjected to during their unusual affair. Although this violence is described in the first part of the novel when he details their relationship, these pictures of Hanna are not the ones he chooses to replay in his memory. His avoidance, be it conscious or unconscious, of memories which

⁷² I am reminded here of an image of such a 'typical' perpetrator in the hostile truck driver who gives Michael a lift to Struthof (*The Reader* 150-152).

⁷³ See my discussion in Chapter 2, section 4.

might point towards her Nazi past, is telling of the protective mechanisms of his psyche. In his first fight with Hanna, he describes her as cold, sarcastic and commanding (*The Reader* 47); in their second fight, Hanna displays impulsive aggression when she strikes him with her belt: “she was standing in the room, trembling with rage and white-faced [...] holding the narrow leather belt that she wore around her dress; she took a step backwards and hit me across the face with it. My lip split and I tasted blood” (*The Reader* 54-55). The whip of Michael’s imaginings recalls this belt. Presumably, this is a picture of Hanna that would be difficult to forget; yet Michael refuses to return to it or replay it. Richard Weisberg suggests that this is a passage which the reader does not easily forget (Weisberg 231). He points out that Michael actually does return to it when he realizes the retrospective implications of Hanna’s illiteracy (231). However, when Michael returns to this incident, he glosses over its violence by referring to Hanna “los[ing] control” because she was afraid of “expos[ure]” (Schlink, *The Reader* 132). While we would expect it to function as a traumatic, haunting and repetitive memory, instead it functions as a blind spot. Like the other pictures Michael has kept of Hanna in his memory, this one also details her face and describes her looking at him: “Her face lost all its shape. Wide-open eyes, wide-open mouth, eyelids swollen after the first tears, red blotches on her cheeks and neck. [...] She stood there looking at me through her tears” (*The Reader* 55). However, despite the fact that this fight actually brings the couple closer to one another, this is still a picture that Michael refuses to include in his collection. Michael’s quick glossing over of this fight, together with his one-sided interpretation of it, demonstrates his desire to remember only the positive aspects of their relationship: “Once again the report on our fight has become so

detailed that I would like to report on our happiness" (*The Reader* 57). However, while he admits his desire to portray their relationship as a happy one, he avoids considering his motives for doing so, which leads us, as readers, to question them. We begin to realize that there is a double story at play within this text: what is left unsaid speaks as loudly as what is said. As in the scenario above, what Michael leaves out, or quickly glosses over, tells us as much, if not more about him than what he reports on.

Michael's desire to remember Hanna one way hampers his attempts to imagine her as a perpetrator. When he pictures her as a concentration camp guard, his mind endeavours to synthesize these imaginations with his personal memories of Hanna: "Alongside these images, I saw others. Hanna pulling on her stockings in the kitchen, standing by the bathtub holding the towel, riding her bicycle with skirts flying, standing in my father's study, dancing in front of the mirror, looking at me at the pool, Hanna listening to me, talking to me, laughing at me, loving me" (*The Reader* 146-147). These images recalled from memory are the very pictures that work as a refrain in part one of the novel. Their repetition here suggests haunting, even though the images emphasize Hanna's ability to love and interact with Michael. In an effort to consolidate his new knowledge of Hanna's past with his memories of her, Michael's imagination merges his memories of her with his imagined images of her. The effect is distressing and jarring:

Hanna loving me with cold eyes and pursed mouth, silently listening to me reading, and at the end banging the wall with her hand, talking to me with her face turning into a mask. The worst were the dreams in which a hard, imperious, cruel Hanna aroused me sexually; I woke from them full of longing and shame and rage. And full of fear about who I really was. (*The Reader* 147)

In this palimpsest of memories and imaginations, Hanna's face becomes the face of a perpetrator with cold eyes and a pursed mouth. Her heart becomes hard as she uses Michael to read to her and then disposes of him. Where Michael had attempted to give Hanna a "face" and a "shape," in his imagination, the "face" and "shape" created for her are damning. The attempted synthesis of these two Hannas creates fear in Michael, for while he longs for and loves Hanna, he is terrified by the way his knowledge of her past now implicates his love. The result of his attempt to imagine Hanna as a perpetrator ultimately cause him to fear "who [he] really [is]." David Dwan reads this passage as Michael's "appalled" reaction to implication of his identification with Hanna. Dwan points out that "the degree to which Michael identifies with Hanna is celebrated in his early love poem: 'we submerge you into me and I into you'" (Dwan 96). Schlink's novel therefore offers a helpful, if subtle, exploration of the way imagining another actually speaks more of the one who imagines than the one being imagined.

Michael recoils from these attempted imaginings in a way reminiscent of Jakob in *Fugitive Pieces* and Sebald's narrator in *The Emigrants*: imagining the other, while desired, is ultimately understood as a betrayal. Jakob speaks of his efforts to imagine Bella in the gas chamber as an act of "blasphemy" (Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* 167) and Sebald's narrator describes it as "wrongful trespass" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 29).⁷⁴ Michael expresses his sentiments in a similar way to these other protagonists: "I knew that my fantasized images were poor clichés. They were unfair to the Hanna I had known and still knew. But still they were very powerful. They undermined my actual memories of Hanna and merged with

⁷⁴ I discuss Sebald's narrator's concerns about fantasy projection with reference to Jakob's conception of blasphemy in Chapter 3, section 6.

the images of the camps that I had in my mind" (*The Reader* 147). However, while there are similarities between the notions of "blasphemy" and "trespass" and Michael's acknowledgement of the "unfair[ness]" at play in his imaginings, the terms of imagining the other are very different in Michael's situation: the person whose past he imagines is still alive. His attempts to imagine Hanna work retrospectively: he tries to reconstruct her life from before they met.

Even as he attempts to imagine Hanna as a perpetrator, Michael's subconscious reveals his inability to convince himself of her guilt. Embedded in Michael's imaginings is a subtle reference that undermines them: Hanna's screaming face is described as "a *mask* of ugliness" and therefore as something that conceals her real face (*The Reader* 146; emphasis mine).⁷⁵ He sees his imagined images as ugly masks that he is attempting to place onto the face of his lover. It is not surprising that he feels a sense of betrayal after he has tried to imagine Hanna-the-perpetrator. The image of the mask recalls the description of the daughter's face as a façade that obscures who she really is. When Michael visits the daughter after Hanna's death, he describes her face as looking as if it has been altered by cosmetic surgery: "Her face was oddly ageless, the way faces look after being lifted" (*The Reader* 212). Alison has read this passage as stating that the daughter's face has indeed undergone a facelift, even though the text itself only says she looks *like* she had had cosmetic surgery. Alison suggests that the facelift furthers the text's comparison of Hanna as the defenceless victim and the daughter as a privileged, self-assured, yet distant, woman. She writes: "Altogether, and astonishingly, the portrait of Hanna is the more sympathetic.

⁷⁵ For a reading of the correlation between the concept of the mask and the culture of shame, see Bill Niven's paper "Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* and the Problem of Shame" (2003).

[...] Against Hanna's simplicity and ignorance stand the daughter's 'cunning' and extreme literacy; against her broad-planed womanliness is the daughter's lifted face" (174-175).⁷⁶ The implication here is that the daughter's façade-like face is just as distancing and alienating as her book. Therefore, by attempting to place a mask over Hanna's face, Michael is betraying Hanna by obscuring her and distancing her.

Michael's inability to reconcile his private portraits of Hanna with his imaginings of her as a perpetrator reveals the tension facing his generation as a whole. The second generation born to perpetrators or living alongside them, have personal images and memories of these people which are often underscored by love. However, as Schlink's text suggests, the face of the perpetrator and the face of the lover cannot be easily reconciled. As a result, Michael chooses to remember Hanna according to his actual memories of her, rather than his imagined pictures of her, which he feels are an unfair betrayal. However, as we are coming to suspect throughout Michael's testimony, he does not give us the full story. At times his testimony cracks and reveals the tension lurking underneath in ways which recall Schlink's more allegorical short story, "Girl with Lizard," which specifically looks at the underlying menace of the secrets of the past.⁷⁷ "Girl with Lizard" has many similarities to *The Reader*: a second generation protagonist, called simply "the boy," grows up with a sense that something is being hidden from him. A sense of menacing secrets pervades

⁷⁶ For Alison, one possible reading of the daughter's facelift is to view it as a troubling symbol of revisionism: "For what does a lifted face represent other than the alteration of traces of the past, together with the financial means to achieve this? Are we to think that the daughter, with her education, worldliness, and media enfranchisement, has fabricated a past, created a legend? Is this novel pure revisionism?" (Alison 176). Alternatively, she suggests that the daughter's facelift is yet another way of making her generic, unindividuated.

⁷⁷ "Girl with Lizard" is more allegorical in that none of the characters are given proper names, but are simply referred to as "the boy," "the girl," "the boy's mother" and "his father" etc.

the story. Throughout his life the boy feels a distance between his inner and outer worlds and “between his family and other people” (*Flights of Love* 6). The story centres on a painting of a girl looking at a small lizard sunning itself on a rock. The boy is not allowed to speak of the painting, yet he does not know why. He inherits the painting after his father’s death and it slowly alienates him from those around him as he strives to keep it hidden. The painting represents the misdeeds and secrets of the past that have a hold on his parents and which are passed on to him. It is described as “dominating” his whole life: “just as had been the case at home, the painting was a treasure, a mystery [...] and at the same time a commanding, controlling power to whom sacrifices would be made” (*Flights of Love* 51). Keeping the secret affects every relationship the boy has. He tries to escape the painting’s hold but “it [will not] leave him in peace” (*Flights of Love* 48). Finally he decides to burn the painting in order to be free from having to “hide things” (*Flights of Love* 35). Yet, as it burns, the canvas peels up to reveal another, more menacing painting hidden beneath it which presents the opposite scenario to the painting that covered it: in it, a “giant lizard” looms above a “tiny girl” in a threatening, powerful way (*Flights of Love* 51). This portrayal of the menacing secrets of the past and the burden of trying to keep them hidden functions as an effective metaphor for the predicament of the second generation. Not only do Michael’s imaginings betray Hanna, but they also speak of his confusion and complicity resulting from the incompatibility of his love for her and his knowledge of her Nazi past.

5. Keeping Secrets

Rather than attempt to reconcile his memories of Hanna as his lover with his knowledge of Hanna as a perpetrator, Michael attempts to defend her during her trial. His defence calls his position as a witness into question, as not only does it reveal his bias towards Hanna, but it also reveals his complicity in keeping her secret. It is precisely for these reasons that Schlink's text has provoked sustained moral critique. In Michael's account of the trial, Hanna is described, in all the tenderness of his intimate knowledge of her, in a way which seems intent on evoking sympathy for her. Critics such as Daniel Stern, Johan MacKinnon and Pedro Tabensky have all registered their discomfort with this encouragement of sympathy, while Weisburg has responded to their discomfort by suggesting that *The Reader* "associates judgement with a sympathy that does not condone" (231)

Michael's testimony provides exactly what he felt was missing in the daughter's account: where the daughter's book fails to give "clear enough *faces* or *shapes*" to the female guards, Michael provides detailed descriptions of Hanna's physical body and of her emotions (*The Reader* 119; emphasis mine). However, these emotions are Michael's interpretations. He has no actual knowledge of or access to what Hanna is thinking and feeling during the trial, he only has his own speculations and deductions, which are based on his rather limited knowledge of her.⁷⁸

Throughout his account of the trial, Michael consistently portrays Hanna as a victim of the court proceedings. Although he cannot see Hanna's face for most of trial, Michael still carefully relays and interprets her body language:

⁷⁸ Conway speaks about Michael having limited knowledge of Hanna (Conway 289).

I watched her from behind. I saw her head, her neck, her shoulders. I decoded her head, her neck, her shoulders. When she was being discussed, she held her head very erect. When she felt she was being unjustly treated, slandered, or attacked and she was struggling to respond, she rolled her shoulders forward and her neck swelled, showing the play of muscles. The objections were regularly overruled, and her shoulders regularly sank. She never shrugged, and she never shook her head. She was too keyed up to allow herself anything as casual as a shrug or a shake of the head. Nor did she allow herself to hold her head at an angle, or to let it fall, or to lean her chin on her hand. She sat as if frozen. It must have hurt to sit that way. (*The Reader* 100)

In this passage, we see how carefully Michael constructs Hanna as a victim through his emphasis on her physicality. His repeated focus on “her head, her neck, her shoulders” draws our attention into close proximity with her body. He describes how seriously she takes the court proceedings, evidenced in her refusal of any casual body language. Furthermore, words like “felt” and “struggling,” together with phrases such as “keyed up” and “allow herself,” suggest intimate knowledge of Hanna’s emotional state, rather than Michael’s interpretation and speculation. Michael speaks of her “struggling to respond” to “attack[s],” “slander[...],” and “unjust treat[ment]”—words which suggest discriminatory and unfair behaviour. However, the following description of Hanna’s neckline reveals the extent of emotional memory Hanna’s physical body activates in Michael: “[s]ometimes Hanna wore a dress with a neckline low enough to reveal the birthmark high on her left shoulder. Then I remembered how I had blown the hair away from that neck and how I had kissed that birthmark and that neck” (*The Reader* 100). We cannot read passages like this without considering the extent to which Michael’s bias—his romantic memories of Hanna and love for her—influence his interpretation of her during the trial. As

a result, he cannot provide a description which would allow “the reader to be able to relate to them [the female camp guards], to judge their act for better or worse” as he suggests such descriptions would be able to do, if they were provided in the daughter’s testimony (*The Reader* 119).

Michael’s bias is further revealed in the way he portrays Hanna as a trusting and honest victim of the court. Her naïveté is portrayed in her apparent expectation of and desire for truthfulness in the trial proceedings: “Hanna wanted to do the right thing. When she thought she was being done an injustice, she contradicted it, and when something was rightly claimed or alleged, she acknowledged it. She contradicted vigorously and admitted willingly [...] But she did not notice that her insistence annoyed the presiding judge” (*The Reader* 109-110). Michael watches all this from a distance and yet he speaks for Hanna as if he had knowledge of her thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, Hanna is portrayed as the scapegoat of her fellow camp guards. Their shrewd understanding of “the rules of the game” is contrasted with her naïveté: “[s]he had no sense of context” (*The Reader* 110). As the other defendants distort the truth and speak against Hanna, Michael describes them in unfavourable language. One of Hanna’s fellow defendants is referred to as “a coarse woman, not unlike a fat broody hen but with a spiteful tongue”; she is said to be “visibly worked up” when she calls Hanna a “dirty liar” (*The Reader* 115). While Hanna’s co-defendants are portrayed as liars, she is painted as a seeker of truth who is emotionally restrained; while they readily deny the report that incriminates them, Hanna is willing to admit to the role she played as a camp guard. In contrast to her fellow defendants, Hanna appears remarkably innocent, despite, or rather because of, her admission of guilt.

This, however, is clearly not the full truth, as Hanna does lie in order to keep her illiteracy a secret. It is out of fear of revealing the shame of her illiteracy that she admits to writing the report. Michael acknowledges this, but in a way which seems to downplay her lie as something Hanna *had* to do:

She accepted that she would be called to account, and simply did not wish to endure further exposure. She was not pursuing her own interests, but fighting for her own truth, her own justice. Because *she always had to dissimulate somewhat*, and could never be completely candid, it was a pitiful truth and a pitiful justice, but it was hers, and the struggle for it was her struggle. (*The Reader* 133-134; emphasis mine)

Hanna's desire for truth here is contrasted with Michael's portrayal of the unjust nature of the court proceedings. Although he admits Hanna's "truth" is "pitiful," Michael still suggests that it demonstrates more of a gesture towards honesty than evidenced in the rest of the court participants. Michael justifies Hanna's lies, as he sees that they are told in an effort to maintain her secret illiteracy; he further absolves them by suggesting that Hanna's lie does not cause her escape any punishment due to her. He focuses on her honesty and her emotional struggle and, as a result, becomes complicit in keeping her secret.

Michael even provides an attempted defence of Hanna once he realizes that her actions in court must be the result of her secret illiteracy. He assumes that he knows and understands Hanna and the court does not. His entire defence is written in the negative so as to negate the charges laid against her:

No, Hanna had not decided in favour of crime. She had decided against a promotion at Siemens, and fell into a job as a guard. And no, she had not dispatched the delicate and the weak on transports to Auschwitz because they had read to her; she had chosen them to read to her because she wanted to make their last month bearable before their inevitable dispatch to Auschwitz. And no, at the trial Hanna did not weigh exposure as an illiterate against exposure as a

criminal. She did not calculate and she did not manoeuvre. (*The Reader* 133)

Michael's defence hinges on Hanna's illiteracy as the primary cause of her actions. Phrases such as "fell into a job" imply an element of fate and lack of agency on Hanna's part. His defence implies that she cannot be guilty for circumstances out of her control; each "no [...] she did not" stresses the misinterpretation of Hanna happening in the trial. Donahue has rightly argued that Michael's defence portrays Hanna's guilt as "not absolute or specific, but relational and vague; defined not positively, but in the negative" ("Illusions" 72). Michael looks for the underlying reasons for Hanna's actions, rather than considering how they appear on the surface. Such determined views and interpretations of Hanna's actions reveal Michael's bias. However, the assurance of Michael's voice speaks more of his bias than it does in defence of Hanna.

Michael faces an ethical quandary as he explores whether he should reveal Hanna's secret or not. He knows that she has chosen to keep her secret, but he is unsure as to whether keeping it is worth the life long consequences incurred. His testimony is filled with questions: "But was it really worth all that? What did she gain from this false self-image which ensnared her and crippled her and paralyzed her? With the energy she put into maintaining the lie, she could have learned to read and write long ago" (*The Reader* 138). Michael seeks out his father's advice on the ethics of his situation, but is unhappy with his suggestion that "one must act if the situation [...] is one of accrued or inherited responsibility" (*The Reader* 143). Michael is not willing to accept the consequences of his complicity and so he fails to speak to Hanna. He does, however, attempt to speak to the judge on her behalf, but when he meets with

him, he cannot bring up the subject. On leaving the judge's offices, Michael begins to feel himself slipping into the very numbness of which he accuses the daughter's testimony. This numbness also pervades the courtroom during the trial. On the train ride home he realizes it is setting in:

Outside, houses passed by, and roads, cars, trees [...] I took it all in and felt nothing. I was no longer upset at having being left, deceived, and used by Hanna. I no longer had to meddle with her. I felt the numbness with which I had followed the horrors of the trial settling over the emotions and thoughts of the past few weeks. It would be too much to say I was happy about this. But I felt it was right. It allowed me to return to and continue to live my everyday life. (*The Reader* 160)

That Michael experiences this numbness directly after concealing Hanna's secret, creates a parallel between numbness and complicity. In deciding to keep Hanna's secret, Michael becomes like those around him who are numbed to the actions of the perpetrators in their midst.

6. Shame and Disavowal

Schlink's introductory paragraph to his collection of essays, *Guilt About the Past*, describes the situation of the second generation as follows:

When we speak of guilt about the past, we are not thinking about individuals, or even organisations, but rather guilt that infects the entire generation that lives through an era—and in a sense the era itself. Even after the era is past, it casts a long shadow over the present, infecting later generations with *a sense of guilt, responsibility and self-questioning*. (*Guilt* 1; emphasis mine)

Arguably, this description could work as an introduction to the themes of *The Reader*, as we see Michael display “a sense of guilt, responsibility and self-questioning” throughout the novel. In the third part of the novel, we begin to see that Michael's narrative is actually more about Hanna's effect on Michael than it

is about her story. Michael only tells Hanna's story as far as it pertains to his. His position as a witness is therefore quite different to Sebald's narrators, for example, who foreground the stories of others and provide very little detail of their own position.

Martin Swales's reading of *The Reader* through the lens of shame provides a helpful understanding of the anxiety and suffering Michael experiences as a result of his relationship with and betrayal of Hanna. Swales proposes that shame affects the narrative mode of the novel at the same time that it works as the primary theme. He points out that shame, unlike guilt, is not a legal transaction, but it "is incomparably more diffuse than guilt. As an emotion of self-assessment, shame is most often physical, even visceral in its causes and manifestations. It is often linked with the sense of being seen in an inappropriate or wrong context – with loosing face" ("Schlink" 10). For Swales, "the issue of context, of framework, is all important because shame arises when the frontiers between distinct and separate worlds are crossed" ("Schlink" 11).⁷⁹ This concept of shame, Swales suggests, is an especially helpful way of approaching Michael's treatment of Hanna after her trial ("Schlink" 12-13).

However, not only is Michael's avoidance of Hanna an example of shame, as Swales suggests, it is also an active suppressing of the secrets of the past. These are interrelated, as we can consider how shame about the past results in keeping secrets. Swales's discussion of shame does not consider Michael's complicity in

⁷⁹ Swales reads *The Reader* in conjunction with Coetzee's *Disgrace*, arguing that both novels portray instances of structuring in which the initial part of the novel depicts a sexual relationship which crosses usual boundaries and is followed by a second part which is more political and focuses on corporate transgressions. Swales argues that while these seemingly disparate structures have caused others to read these novels allegorically, he suggests that reading them through the lens of shame offers more of an attentive reading as "shame, rather than guilt, is what binds together the private and public realms of both stories" (Swales, "Schlink" 11).

keeping Hanna's secret, although this is arguably an avenue of the discussion of shame with which he would agree. Schlink, however, is more vocal about the situation of guilt, and the transference of guilt through complicity portrayed in Michael's keeping of Hanna's secret. Transferred guilt results in such shame, as the second generation attempts to "save-face" for themselves as well as for those they love. This often leads to keeping silent about the past.

Michael's loyalty to Hanna's secret illiteracy appears to be at the core of his inability to speak about her or their relationship. We see this in Michael's refusal to tell his wife about Hanna. When he meets a fellow student of the trial many years later, he anxiously anticipates the man's questions about Hanna; when the fellow student does broach the topic Michael runs away in his efforts to avoid the question: "I didn't know what to answer, how to betray, confess, parry" (*The Reader* 178). However, not only does Michael avoid the question, but he also feels that answering it would either result in a betrayal of Hanna, or a confession on his behalf. Even after Hanna's death, when Michael is speaking with a warden who knows of her illiteracy, he refuses to share about their relationship. He keeps it a secret. Similar avoidance in order to keep secrets is seen in "Girl with Lizard" in that the boy avoids relationships in order to keep the painting a secret: "He realized he wanted to fall in love [...] But he had to watch every word and be evasive [...] He could not become as intimate as he would have liked. It occurred to him that if they were to meet in his town and decided to go to his place, he could not ask her up to his room. The picture was hanging there" (*Flights of Love* 34-35). These notions of confession or betrayal suggest that there is more at play here than shame alone. Shame is individual, while betrayal suggests bringing about shame for another.

However, Michael's primary guilt concerns his inability to reconcile his love for Hanna with his horror at her crimes. Despite his attempts to defend her and remember her, as I have examined in the previous sections of this chapter, ultimately he feels that he betrays Hanna by keeping her a secret: "I began to betray her. Not that I gave away any secrets or exposed Hanna. I didn't reveal anything that I should have kept to myself. I kept something to myself that I should have revealed. I didn't acknowledge her" (*The Reader* 74). Michael speaks of this as his "disavowal" of Hanna, and it is this treatment of Hanna which calls his ability to witness on her behalf into question more than any other aspect of his narrative (74).

Yet, try as he may to keep Hanna distant and contained, Michael's memories of her overshadow his entire life. Michael's memories of Hanna are connected with feelings of responsibility and worries of betrayal. After he has been forced to visit her in prison, he struggles with memories which accuse him and activate his sense of responsibility:

Only occasionally [...] did thoughts of it [visiting her again] get the upper hand and trigger memories. I saw her on the bench, her eyes fixed on me, saw her at the swimming pool, her face turned to me, and again had the feeling that I had betrayed her and owed her something. And again, I rebelled against this feeling; I accused her, and found it both shabby and too easy, the way she had wriggled out of her guilt. Allowing no one but the dead to demand an accounting, reducing guilt and atonement to insomnia and bad feelings—where did that leave the living? But what I meant was not the living, it was me. Did I not have my own accounting to demand of her? What about me? (*The Reader* 201)

At this point in the text, Michael reveals his own sense of betrayal. I read this as more than a sense of shame: it is evidence of the wounding that Michael has experienced through his relationship with Hanna. As such, Michael's situation is

both similar and different to that of the second generation of survivors. Michael's sense of rebelling against what he feels as his responsibility speaks to the tensions facing his generation as a whole.⁸⁰

Michael knowingly sets the terms of their relationship once Hanna is in prison: he keeps her "both close and removed" in a small "niche" of his life (Schlink, *The Reader* 193; 198). His only contact with her is to read to her on tape; he never writes to her or replies to her messages: "I never made a personal remark on the tapes, never asked after Hanna, never told her anything about myself. I read out the title, the name of the author, and the text. When the text was finished, I waited a moment, closed the book, and pressed the Stop button" (*The Reader* 186). Pressing the stop button signals the boundaries Michael has set on their relationship; it signals his unwillingness to engage with Hanna beyond reading aloud. His admittance that he does not want to revisit or revise his work suggests a desire to restrain the level of engagement his texts provoke. Similarly, he wishes for his reading aloud of his work to be "the culmination"—a suggestion that he does not want his work to elicit a response with which he would then have to engage. His refusal to reply to Hanna's written responses also seems to suggest this refusal. He describes their communication as "word-driven," yet "wordless contact" (*The Reader* 187). And yet, his response is to

⁸⁰ Schlink's conceptions of the transference of guilt underpin these comments. In *Guilt About the Past*, he argues that the concept of collective guilt can be traced back to ancient Germanic law, in which the perpetrator's clan, and especially their immediate family and their children, were collectively responsible to the victim's clan (*Guilt* 5). Although this is no longer the way current legal systems work, Schlink suggests that the notion of collective guilt is still "normative" and can be extended to those who maintain "solidarity" with a criminal (*Guilt* 12-13). In the essay titled "Collective Guilt," Schlink investigates the transference of this guilt to the next generation and discusses at which point this "guilt of non-repudiation" is assuaged (*Guilt* 19). He suggests that this guilt begins to dissipate by the third generation, as maintaining solidarity with dead grandparents "is not an actual alternative for the grandchildren" (*Guilt* 21).

continue to write for and read to her within the confines of the niche he has created for her.

Thus, as Michael engages with Hanna, he also fails to engage with her. Although he suggests that “[r]eading aloud was [his] way of speaking to her, with her,” Michael only allows it to be his way of speaking *to* her and not necessarily *with* her (*The Reader* 190). He is afraid of a face-to-face encounter, as it will bring the secrets to the surface:

Precisely because she was both close and removed in such an easy way, I didn’t want to visit her. I had the feeling she could only be what she was to me at an actual distance. I was afraid that the small, light, safe world of notes and cassettes was too artificial and too vulnerable to withstand actual closeness. How could we meet face to face without everything that happened between us coming to the surface? (*The Reader* 193)

Michael only visits Hanna in prison once. When they do finally meet face to face in prison, Michael’s face betrays Hanna: “I saw the expectation in her face, saw it light up with joy when she recognized me, watched her eyes scan my face as I approached, saw them seek, inquire, then look uncertain and hurt, and saw the light go out of her face. When I reached her, she smiled a friendly, weary smile” (*The Reader* 196). Weisburg suggests that this scene portrays Michael’s “failure to respond to Hanna’s eager gaze” in a gesture of “nonverbal rejection” (Weisburg 234). After Hanna’s death, Michael only visits her grave once, which reveals the extent to which shame informs his outward disavowal (*The Reader* 218).

7. Unwritten Stories

Like the other protagonists in the texts I have explored in this thesis, Michael Berg is also an author figure. However, Michael's status as a writer is encompassed in his status as a reader. It is only through reading to Hanna that Michael begins to explore forms of writing. The first reference to Michael as a writer occurs in the midst of his description of himself reading aloud to Hanna on tape:

When I began writing myself, I read these pieces aloud to her as well. I waited until I had dictated my handwritten text, and revised the typewritten version, and had the feeling that now it was finished. When I read it aloud, I could tell if the feeling was right or not. And if not, I could revise it and record a new version over the old. But I didn't like doing that. I wanted to have my reading be the culmination. Hanna became the court before which once again I concentrated all my energies, all my creativity, all my critical imagination. After that, I could send the manuscript to the publisher. (*The Reader* 185)

In this instance, there is a reversal of roles, as Hanna becomes the sounding board and "court" before which Michael defends his work. His memories of Hanna therefore activate his writing, which is written for her and in response to her. There is an element of reciprocity in their constrained communication, then, as Michael learns to write for Hanna and Hanna learns to read "with" Michael through following the books he reads to her (*The Reader* 206). However, as I argued in the previous section, Michael's sense of shame keeps these strained instances of communication and non-communication within the private sphere.

In the final chapter of the novel, Michael explores his motives for writing his and Hanna's story. He suggests that while he wanted to be free from it and also desired to preserve it, that neither of these motives enabled the telling:

At first I wanted to write our story in order to be free of it. But the memories wouldn't come back for that. Then I realized our story was slipping away from me and I wanted to recapture it by writing, but that didn't coax up the memories either. For the last few years I've left our story alone. I've made peace with it. And it came back, detail by detail and in such a fully rounded fashion, with its own direction and its own sense of completion, that it no longer makes me sad. What a sad story, I thought for so long. Not that I now think it was happy. But I think it is true, and thus the question of whether it is sad or happy has no meaning whatever. (*The Reader* 217)

Michael proposes that it is only once he decided to make peace with his story that he was able to write about it. However, after delivering such an emotionally charged account of his and Hanna's story, for Michael to suggest that this is a story that proceeded from a place of peace leads the reader to feel a sense of disbelief. Our disbelief is further strengthened when Michael admits that he is still haunted by memories of Hanna:

But if something hurts me, the hurts I suffered back then come back to me, and when I feel guilty, the feelings of guilt return; if I yearn for something today, or feel homesick, I feel the yearnings and homesickness from back then. The tectonic layers of our lives rest so tightly one on top of the other that we always come up against earlier events in later ones, not as matter that has been fully formed and pushed aside, *but absolutely present and alive*. I understand this. Nevertheless, I sometimes find it hard to bear. Maybe I did write our story to be free of it, even if I never can be. (*The Reader* 217-218; emphasis mine)

The suggestions of traumatic haunting are clear in this passage. Michael speaks of how when memories are triggered about Hanna, they recur not as events from the past, but as "absolutely present and alive." He admits that he would like to be free from this haunting, even though he understands he never will be. However, the passage which is most important at the end of this novel is the one in which Michael reflects on the writing process involved in telling his story. As a story

which is written after Hanna's death, this work is not written with her in mind, but rather is written to activate our response as readers. Michael writes:

Soon after her death, I decided to write the story of me and Hanna. Since then I've done it many times in my head, each time a little differently, each time with new images, and new strands of action and thought. *Thus there are many different stories in addition to the one I have written.* The guarantee that the written one is the right one lies in the fact that I wrote it and not the other versions. The written version wanted to be written, the many others did not. (*The Reader* 216-217; emphasis mine)

What is most curious about this confession is that although Michael's language appears assertive on the surface—"guarantee" and "the right one"—he invites us to think about the contingency of this story. One single line, which I have emphasised, instantly destabilizes Michael's insistence on this version of his story being "the right one". It is as if a host of unwritten stories haunt the text. Furthermore, upon reading this line, the knowledge of the contingency of the text ripples backwards, destabilizing Michael's entire narrative. What other stories could have been written but were not, we ask ourselves. Which parts remain hidden? Why might they have not "wanted to be written" like the version that was written? The reader is therefore placed in a situation, which, on some levels, mimics Michael's experience of learning about Hanna's Nazi past: "Why does what was beautiful suddenly shatter in hindsight because it concealed dark truths?" (*The Reader* 37). With this one confession of other unwritten stories at the end of the narrative, everything else which we have read up to this point is reframed. The result is a text that is both destabilizing and haunting. And this, probably, is the most productive element of the entire narrative as it calls into question the position of the witness. Schlink's text performs a double telling

through layering Michael's assertive voice with the silences and unwritten stories of his text.

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Conclusion: The Afterlives of Narratives

*not two to make one,
but two to make
the third,*

*just as a conversation can become
the third side of the page*

(Michaels, Correspondences n. pag)

1. Introduction

In this thesis I have argued that the work of the second generation authors selected provides a varied collection of responses to the transmission of trauma and the predicament specific to this generation. The novels I have examined demonstrate an acute awareness of the way memory and guilt are transmitted from one generation to the next. However, I have endeavoured to show that these concerns are not limited to thematic portrayals, but they also form the driving force behind the unique textual strategies employed within these works. Rather than simply examining “the weight of memory” thematically, each text develops strategies for passing on this weight (and its resultant sense of responsibility) to the reader. I have explored how Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* and Sebald’s *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* employ textual devices with the express aim of including their readers in the process of carrying and passing on memory. Not only do these texts demonstrate the witnessing process within the world of the text, but they also employ methods of textual address which reach outside the text and invite the reader to respond. My discussion of Schlink’s novel provides a helpful counter-text, as it examines the weight of the memory of perpetration and offers a different perspective on the concept of passing on.

Schlink's text interrogates the position of the second generation witness and reveals the inevitable failure facing the witness who seeks to reconcile his love for the perpetrator with the knowledge of the perpetrator's past actions. The double-telling in Schlink's text performs a different type of layering of voices: voices are not presented in posthumous dialogue, but rather the protagonist's voice is layered over the silence the untold stories of the text. The concealing at work in Schlink's text suggests that passing on is not necessarily desired on the part of the second generation who inherits the memory of perpetration. I am reminded of the refrain repeated at the close of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, another iconic work of trauma fiction: "This is not a story to pass on" (324). We see something to this effect in Schlink's text: some memories are not meant to be, or cannot be, passed on in the same way as others.

The aesthetic has formed an integral part in the discussions of this thesis. Aesthetics, as I have already suggested, outlines the distinctive underlying principles of a work of art or genre, while it is also focused on the sensory experience of a work of art. By way of conclusion, therefore, I would like to consider an additional text which presents an overtly aesthetic expression of the primary concerns of this thesis as it functions as a conceptual art object. I explore how *Correspondences* presents the primary concerns of this thesis in a tangible form that performs Anne Michaels's notion of "the third side of the page". The third side of the page points to the reader, who becomes the afterlife of the text. I linger on this concept of the afterlife of a narrative by way of conclusion, as at this contemporary moment, as the last of the generation of survivors and perpetrators are passing away, the possibility of the afterlife of memory has become even more urgent.

2. Correspondences

In December 2013, Anne Michaels published a work which gives tangible form to the primary concerns of this dissertation. The book, titled *Correspondences: A Poem and Portraits*, is a collaborative project between Michaels and artist and author Bernice Eisenstein.⁸¹ Its layout is best described as an accordion book. There is a portrait on one cover and if you open the book from this side, you will encounter Eisenstein's 26 portraits, painted in muted shades of charcoal, blue, violet, white and jade.⁸² Each portrait is placed on the right-hand side of the page and is accompanied by a brief caption on the corresponding left-hand page. For the most part, these passages are taken from either the poetry or prose of the person in the portrait.⁸³ The other side of the book, which has the epigraph imprinted in its cover, unfolds in a book-length poem dedicated to Michaels's father, Isaiah.⁸⁴

As an art object, *Correspondences*' physical presentation makes visible the aesthetic and ethical structures and strategies I have examined in this dissertation. The presentation of the book is productively destabilizing: its layout exposes its fragility at the same time that it foregrounds the act of reading. As an art object, the text's physical form enacts the layers of conversations and

⁸¹ Eisenstein is known for her second generation graphic memoir, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006).

⁸² I have been unsuccessful in finding out the exact medium Eisenstein used for these portraits. They appear to be a mix of charcoal and watercolour. However, nowhere in the text or on the publisher's website is any information given as to what medium was used. If the portraits did incorporate charcoal, the obvious reference to ash would create yet another layer of textual meaning for this project and would invite further discussion on the Holocaust resonances at work in this text.

⁸³ Eisenstein explains her use of quotations and passages as follows: "Most of the individuals portrayed in these pages are accompanied by their own words. Sometimes an individual's words are brought together from more than one source. On occasion, the words of another writer become the voice for the individual portrayed" (*Correspondences n. pag*).

⁸⁴ A portrait of Isaiah Michaels is also included in Eisenstein's collection and many of the others.

dialogues that speak to and include the reader. The presentation of the text, together with the collection of faces that stare out from the portraits, performs an address. An analysis of the book as a conceptual art object will therefore enable me to revisit the central claims and concerns of this dissertation.⁸⁵

Correspondences' accordion-style layout calls into question how we engage with and read a work. No spine holds the book together; rather, the two covers create bookends for the concertina-type pages between them. These pages are joined together, creating one long double-sided sheet that can be folded together or spread out. *Correspondences* is two books in one. However, there are no obvious textual markers to suggest how we are meant to approach the work or from which side we are meant to start reading. The conspicuous lack of page numbers promotes further flexibility in reading. The endpapers are repeated on both sides of the book, creating a haunting repetition of names, dates of birth and dates of death. As such, reviewers have called this a "circular" work, remarking that when one closes one side of the book, another book opens (Hickman *n. pag*; Kellaway *n. pag*). The repetition of these endpapers creates a sense of circularity rather than linearity and complicates attempts to find the book's beginning or end.

The fragmentary construction of Michaels's long poem also foregrounds the act of reading. There are multiple ways to read this poem. The right-hand pages meditate on Celan's and Sachs's correspondence, single meeting and coincident deaths, while the left-hand pages perform an elegy for Michaels's father. The poem can also be read as a whole, from left to right, or, as Hickman has pointed

⁸⁵ For the purposes of this conclusion, I confine my discussion for the most part to the book as a conceptual piece; an in-depth analysis of Michaels's poem will have to be reserved for future study.

out, it can also be read as a collection of individual small poems (Hickman *n. pag*). The fragmentary nature of the stanzas, combined with the considerable amount of empty space on the pages (most of the stanzas take up a third of the page and leave the rest blank, while quite a few pages have as little as 2-4 words, or two lines per page), further invites engagement with the silences of the text. The poem's presentation thus foregrounds the reader's agency in making meaning through how she chooses to engage with the text. It therefore opens itself up entirely to the reader, inviting her to read in whatever way she might choose.

The concertina-like presentation of the book results in fragility and instability. *Correspondences* therefore makes the fragility of the text tangible, whereas other texts I discuss in this dissertation created instability through their narrative structures and devices. The covers are held together by two ribbon-like elastics, which, when removed, cause the book to become precarious and difficult to hold. If one removes the elastics and opens the book too quickly, the weight of the pages, combined with the lack of a spine, causes the concertina-like page to slip between the covers and fall to the floor (something I have experienced more than once when attempting to handle this work). As an art object, *Correspondences* demands careful handling; it highlights its dependence on the reader's hands. I am reminded here of Marianne Hirsch's focus on the inclusion of hands which hold photographs in the work of various postgeneration artists.⁸⁶ Hirsch reads such gestures as moves which introduce "a viewer, someone who holds, listens and responds" and therefore set up the

⁸⁶ I discuss Hirsch's examination of Nancy Spero's art and Art Spiegelman's inclusion of a photograph in section 6 of the Introduction, "Postmemory".

terms by which “images that have survived the Shoah” are introduced “into a landscape in which they have an afterlife” (*Generation* 123). While Hirsch’s focus is on photographs here, I build on her conception of the purposeful inclusion of the viewer to consider the similar effect brought about by the book’s tangible reliance on the reader’s hands.

In both its fragmentary nature and its collection of portraits, *Correspondences* recalls Austerlitz’s photographic table—an image which has become a touchstone for the preoccupations of this dissertation. As I explored in Chapter 3, Austerlitz’s photographic collection is presented to the narrator in no specific layout. The photographs invite the viewer’s participation through engaging him in slow and careful study and they allow for infinite arrangements. Similarly, the collection of portraits, quotations and poems presented in *Correspondences* slows down the process of reading. In an interview with Ian McGillis, Michaels speaks about the way the book creates textual pauses: “The way that [the book] opens up is that it unfolds [...] it’s not just a linear page-upon-page thing [...] but something that slows a reader down for the looking. They can move about anywhere through the book, and in so doing it brings a reader more intimately into the book” (Michaels and McGillis *n. pag*).⁸⁷ The reader is encouraged to take time to look, read and re-read the text. Like the game of family resemblances that Austerlitz plays with his photographs, there are multiple correspondences and connections between the portraits, quotations and the lines of the poem, which both invite multiple approaches to reading and suggest re-reading. Furthermore the lack of page numbers suggests that the

⁸⁷ Kate Kellaway has also commented on this invitation to slow reading in her review: “[i]n an age of instant reaction, [the book] demands contemplation. Even more than an ordinary volume of poetry, it asks you to take time” (Kellaway *n. pag*).

portraits and the poem could be rearranged and read in any order. Although the accordion style of the book does limit the rearrangements a little more than Austerlitz's loose collection of photographs, opening and closing different folds of the book allows for different pages to be read as if they were side by side. The very construction of the text calls to and invites the reader to participate: to enter the layers of conversation within the text and accept the level of agency required of them in the process of reading.

The collection of portraits creates layers of visual address. The majority of the faces in the portraits address the reader through gazing directly at him. However, some of the faces look slightly away, or at one another, and in two of the portraits, their eyes are closed.⁸⁸ What is most significant about the gaze of these faces, however, is that all but one of these portraits is of the dead. The endpapers that provide brief biographies for each person presented in the work also provide their dates of birth and death. The collection of portraits is therefore a collection of the dead, who gaze at the reader as if they were ghosts returning from the past. The effect is similar to that created by Max Ferber's portraits, in which the narrator sees "a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash, but still there, as ghostly presences" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 162).

The only portrait in the book that is not of someone already known to be dead is the portrait of Tereska.⁸⁹ Tereska's portrait is accompanied by lines from

⁸⁸ Both Isaiah Michaels and Charlotte Salomon's eyes are closed in their portraits.

⁸⁹ The only information given for Tereska in the book is as follows: "TERESKA (*Poland, 1948*) Little is known of Tereska beyond her portrait, a photograph by David Szymin, pseudonym Chim. In 1948, on assignment to document the state of refugee children in Europe, Chim photographed a girl whose childhood had been spent in a concentration camp and who was now a resident in a home for 'disturbed children.' She stands next to a chalkboard covered with a blur of white lines; her picture of 'home.' This girl, Tereska, is one of 'Chim's children.'" (*Correspondences*)

a poem by Emily Dickinson, which forms an explicit instance of textual address: “I’m Nobody! Who are you? / Are you – Nobody – Too?” (Eisenstein, *Correspondences*). The use of pronouns in these lines speaks explicitly to the reader, inviting her into conversation. Furthermore, Tereska’s portrait presents a similar visual address to the photograph of Austerlitz as a page boy; the portrait’s “piercing, inquiring gaze” which “demand[s] [its] dues” activates a sense of responsibility in the viewer (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 260).⁹⁰

Not only are the faces presented in each portrait a visible address, but the quotations and the poem also stage instances of textual address. There are many references to “you” throughout Michaels’s poem. Some of these are addressed to the dead and therefore stage unanswered addresses similar to those I discussed in Chapter 1. Michaels’s poem addresses her deceased father and, in the lines which re-enact the correspondence between Celan and Sachs, the frequent use of “you” also goes unanswered by the original addressees. As I explored in Chapter 1, all these instances of unanswered addresses within the world of the text implicate the reader who stands outside of the text.⁹¹

However, this book also presents a slightly different form of address to Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*. The address here is not so much an overhearing of an address to a “you” within the world of the text, but an overhearing of a multi-layered, multi-voiced conversation. While *Fugitive Pieces* presented two of the voices of a fugue (as I suggested in Chapter 1, section 2), *Correspondences* presents a full complement of fugal variances. Within the world of the text, voices speak to and with one another: they address each other individually and

⁹⁰ For my discussion of the page boy photograph as an instance of visual address that creates a sense of responsibility in the viewer, see section 2 in Chapter 3.

⁹¹ See my discussion in Chapter 1, section 2: “An Address Overheard”.

collectively. The reader of the text therefore overhears these layers of textual address and response and is invited to respond at multiple levels of address. In the captions that accompany Eisenstein's portraits there are more references to a collective "we" and an "us," than there are to a singular "you". These collective pronouns include the reader in an expansive and communal conversation: they encourage the reader's voice to join theirs, to partake of the "we" and become part of "us".⁹² Eisenstein's brief write-up at the end of her side of the book describes this invitation to the collective: "The pages unfold in a myriad of arrangements, and voices speak not only from the singularity of their souls but one to another, embracing all that has been placed beneath and inside. A layered kinship is formed, a touch across the pages" (Eisenstein, *Correspondences n.pag*).⁹³ Michaels's poem also invokes this sense of being invited into a communal kinship:

and so,
I beg you,

come out of the night, just this night, and into
the hallway,

leave your boots
by the door [...]
[...] the book open

to the third side of the page

⁹² While the pronoun "we" is used inclusively here, "we" does not necessarily function as a straightforward instance of positive invitation to inclusion. It can function to create exclusion or force coercion. The use of the pronoun "we" can speak for one who is absent; but it might speak for the absent one against her wishes. As Carrol Clarkson has explored in her chapter "Who Are We?" in *Drawing the Line*, the use of the pronoun "'we' does not simply affirm an easy intersubjectivity; instead it raises questions about the ephemeral and unstable limit of its reference" (164).

⁹³ The lack of page numbers creates difficulty when attempting to reference this piece. Eisenstein's words here are from the back of her part of the book, where, together with the permissions for the quotations used, she provides a very brief explanation of the way she has used the quotations. The only other textual clues provided in this end paper are the two words "unfold" and "enfold" provided with their dictionary definitions.

[...]

Come, it's time to set the table,

[...] leave off the book,

open, with its words against the pillow.

[...] Help me carry

the chairs, never enough chairs,

[...] Draw close

your father's chair next to my father's,

and I'll fetch a book for the orphan's chair,

so she can reach the table.

And last, a chair for the mourner

who accompanies the body, so the soul is never,

not for a single moment, alone. (Michaels, *Correspondences*

n.pag)⁹⁴

The verbs and pronouns in this section of the poem highlight the sense of invitation at work. Imperatives such as “come” are repeated, which, together with the phrase “I beg you” creates a heightened sense of summoning of the reader. Furthermore, the imagery of setting the table, combined with the collecting of chairs further invokes the sense of community. Michaels discusses this imagery of gathering around the table: “We had this image of these figures gathering at a table, the table of history. [...] We also felt very strongly that this gathering would provide a kind of solace, a kind of shelter, for everyone present” (Michaels and McGillis *n. pag*). The poet and artist’s gathering of the many faces and voices in this text therefore presents a community of witnesses. As one reviewer has remarked, the accordion pages allow one to stretch the book out flat, resulting in a visible community of faces: “You can read the text as one long found poem as some portraits look at you approvingly and others look sideways at their neighbour” (Hickman *n. pag*). The effect of these faces, together with the

⁹⁴ Here again I am not able to provide page numbers, as there are none. These sections of Michaels’s poem come right towards the end and are taken only from the left-hand pages.

layering of voices within the text creates a textual conversation that both addresses and includes the reader.

The fecundity of these correspondences and conversations is expressed in Michaels's notion of "the third side of the page," which forms part of the governing register of the project as a whole (*Correspondences*). I refer to the lines I have used as the epigraph for this conclusion:

not two to make one,
but two to make
the third,

just as a conversation can become
the third side of the page. (Michaels, *Correspondences*)

These lines evoke the collaboration between Michaels and Eisenstein: each has contributed half of the book. However, these two contributions do not simply create one book, they join together to create a "third". Michaels compares this fertility to the fruitfulness of conversation; or, to put it more specifically: the way overhearing a conversation has the ability to generate a response. The notion of the productive effect of textual address, which I explore in *Fugitive Pieces*, is expressed clearly here.⁹⁵ The phrase, "the third side of the page," is repeated three times in the book: once on the cover and twice in the poem. The first time it appears within the poem, is in the midst of the invitation to join the table of guests, in the lines quoted above, where Michaels invokes "the book open / to the third side of the page" (*Correspondences*). That the reader has the book open while reading these lines further reinforces the idea that this book is an invitation to participate in the conversation. Thus, the reader becomes "the third

⁹⁵ I examine the effect of textual address in *Fugitive Pieces* in section 3 of Chapter 1, "An Address Overheard".

side of the page” as the book opens to the reader. “We must *learn to feel addressed by a book*,” writes Walter Kaufmann, “by the human being behind it, as if a person spoke directly to us. A good book or essay or poem is not primarily an object to be put to us, or an object to experience: it is the voice of You speaking to me, requiring a response” (Kaufmann in Buber 39).⁹⁶

The precise way in which this book’s presentation both foregrounds and invokes the reader’s involvement constitutes a tangible form of literary address. *Correspondences* is already a conversation between the two authors, as well as a re-enactment of the correspondence between Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs. The book length poem also performs a posthumous conversation between Anne Michaels and her father, Isaiah, at the same time that it stages the textual conversations between all those around the table: “The men and women gathered here inhabited a historical landscape Isaiah Michaels knew intimately; their times and their concerns are joined to his own. Together they represent a particular and profound relationship. Words from a place deeper than a single heart” (*Correspondences*).⁹⁷ Of specific interest for this dissertation, is the inclusion of W. G. Sebald in this text, as it creates a textual response to Sebald’s work within Michaels’s and therefore stages an intertextual dialogue between two of the authors in this study. Sebald’s portrait is accompanied by the following extract from *The Rings of Saturn*: “And yet, what would we be without

⁹⁶ I examined this statement by Kaufmann in Chapter 1, section 3, “An Address Overheard”.

⁹⁷ I include the list of those in the portraits here in the order that they appear in Eisenstein’s side of the text: Paul Celan, Joseph Schmidt, Rose Ausländer, Fernando Pessoa, Fred Wander, Charlotte Delbo, André Schwarz-Bart, Primo Levi, Debora Vogel, Bruno Schulz, Franz Kafka, Anna Akhmatova, Albert Einstein, Tereska, Osip Mandelstam, Isaiah Michaels, Itsik Manger, W. G. Sebald, Nadezhda Mandelstam, Jean Améry, Etty Hillesum, Albert Camus, Helen Keller, S. Y. Agnon, Charlotte Salomon and Nelly Sachs.

memory?" (*Correspondences*; Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 255).⁹⁸ Furthermore, the collection of people in Eisenstein's portraits gathers some of the voices that have informed the discussion in this dissertation: Paul Celan, Primo Levi, Jean Améry, Albert Camus and W. G. Sebald. By bringing these voices together here in the conclusion, *Correspondences* presents the community of witnesses that informs both my authors' writing and my own. It is into this same community that the reader is invited to add their voice of response.

3. Afterlives

As I reflected at the beginning of this thesis, "passing on" speaks to the contemporary moment we find ourselves in, in which the last of the Holocaust survivors and their generation are entering their final decade or so of life. The urgency to tell the story, to pass on the history and memory of the Holocaust, is becoming stronger each year, as is the call for "the generation after" to respond and accept the challenge as caretakers of these memories. 2013 marked the 20th anniversary of the opening of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. At the commemorative ceremony on the 23rd of April 2013, founding chairman Elie Wiesel, who has been one of the strongest voices for the need to remember, witness and pass on the memory of the Holocaust, directed his address to "the generation after," clearly intent on activating its sense of responsibility. "You are now the flag bearers," said Wiesel, "It is your memory that inherits ours. Our memory will live in yours" (Wiesel ushmm.org). Wiesel's image of flag-bearing depicts the passing on of a flag from one generation to the next and speaks to

⁹⁸ This passage is from the words of Sebald's character, the Vicomte de Chateaubrand, who writes about the agonies and necessities of recording memory in language. See my discussion in Chapter 4, section 4 "Fragmentation and Failure".

both his and the museum's explicit intention to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive in the present whether there are direct witnesses to tell about it or not.

In February 2014, I attended a seminar in the English Department at University of Cape Town where professor Jakob Lothe presented a book of survivor testimonies he has helped to collect and edit, titled *Kvinnelige Tidsvitner*.⁹⁹ What made the presentation so poignant was the presence of one of the witnesses Lothe had interviewed for the book: Holocaust survivor Ella Blumenthal. Ella's presence brought history into the present moment for those of us at the seminar. She spoke briefly, telling parts of her testimony and closing her eyes as she remembered incidents and events that happened many years ago now. As Ella spoke, she reflected on the situation in which we find ourselves today: where the generation of survivors is passing away: "There is no one else alive who can tell you this story," she said.¹⁰⁰ Ella's testimony placed those of us in the seminar in the position of being witness to the witness. We listened and received her story and the silence that followed it spoke of the sense of responsibility activated by her address. While soon there may be no one else alive who can tell this story from the position of the direct witness, there will be those who are able to retell it and pass it on *on behalf of* the other. In words that echo those of Elie Wiesel's quoted earlier, Eva Hoffman writes, "the guardianship of the Holocaust is being passed on to us. The second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is transmuted into history, or into myth. It is also the generation in which we can think about

⁹⁹ The literal translation of this title is "Female Time's Witnesses".

¹⁰⁰ Ella Blumenthal. Address. English Department Seminar. University of Cape Town, 28 February 2014.

certain questions arising from the Shoah with a sense of a living connection” (*After Such Knowledge* xv). However, while Hoffman speaks here of the strict second generation as the “hinge generation,” I would like to consider how storytellers of the more broadly defined “generation after” can function as a “hinge” and thus as the caretakers of memory. What is important in these acts of witnessing for the witness, or even witnessing for the “proxy-witness”, is that the teller works as a hinge, who looks backward at the same time that they look forward, bridging the gap between the generations, speaking for and to them at the same time.

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